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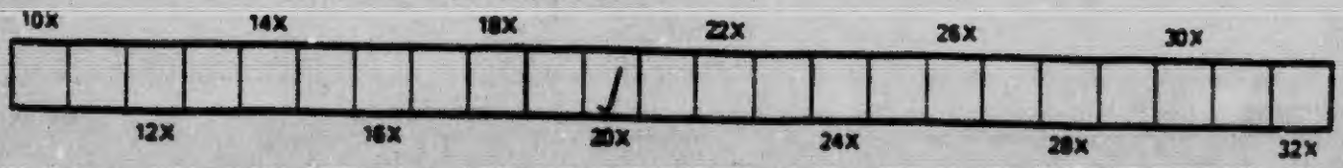

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To Miss Helen McArthur
With all good wishes for
a pleasant and happy Summer
but let us hope it will soon
get to 60° or 70° at least

J. W. Chipman

Montreal July 24/1916

The Bars of Iron

The Bars of Iron

The Bars of Iron

By Ethel M. Dell. Author of "The Way of an Eagle," etc.

TORONTO:
WILLIAM BRIGGS
1916

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I DEDICATE THIS BOOK
TO MY BROTHER REGINALD
WITH MY LOVE

"He hath broken the gates of brass
And smitten the bars of iron in sunder"

Psalm cvii. 16.

"I saw Heaven opened"

Revelation xix. 11.

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THE BARS OF IRON

PROLOGUE

"FIGHT? I'll fight you with pleasure, but I shall probably kill you if I do. Do you want to be killed?" Brief and contemptuous the question fell. The speaker was a mere lad. He could not have been more than nineteen. But he held himself with the superb British assurance that has its root in the British public school and which, once planted, in certain soils is wholly ineradicable.

The man he faced was considerably his superior in height and build. He also was British, but he had none of the other's careless ease of bearing. He stood like an angry bull, with glaring, blood-shot eyes.

He swore a terrific oath in answer to the scornful enquiry. "I'll break every bone in your body!" he vowed. "You little, sneering bantam, I'll smash your face in! I'll thrash you to a pulp!"

The other threw up his head and laughed. He was sublimely unafraid. But his dark eyes shone red as he flung back the challenge. "All right, you drunken bully! Try!" he said.

They stood in the garish light of a Queensland bar, surrounded by an eager, gaping crowd of farmers, boundary-riders, sheep-shearers, who had come down to this township on the coast on business or pleasure at the end of the shearing season.

None of them knew how the young Englishman came to be among them. He seemed to have entered the drinking-saloon without any very definite object in view, unless he had been spurred thither by a spirit of adventure. And having

entered, a boyish interest in the motley crowd, which was evidently new to him, had induced him to remain. He had sat in a corner, keenly observant but wholly unobtrusive, for the greater part of an hour, till, in fact, the attention of the great bully now confronting him had by some ill-chance been turned in his direction.

The man was three-parts drunk, and for some reason not very comprehensible, he had chosen to resent the presence of this clean-limbed, clean-featured English lad. Possibly he recognized in him a type which for its very cleanness he abhorred. Possibly his sodden brain was stirred by an envy which the Colonials round him were powerless to excite. For he also was British-born. And he still bore traces, albeit they were not very apparent at that moment, of the breed from which he had sprung.

Whatever the cause of his animosity, he had given it full and ready vent. A few coarse expressions aimed in the direction of the young stranger had done their work. The boy had risen to go with disgust written openly upon his face, and instantly the action had been seized upon by the older man as a cause for offence.

He had not found his victim slow to respond. In fact his challenge had been flung back with an alacrity that had somewhat astonished the bystanders and rendered interference a matter of some difficulty.

But one of them did at this juncture make his voice heard in a word of admonition to the half-tipsy aggressor.

"You had better mind what you do, Samson. There will be a row if that young chap gets hurt."

"Yes, he'd better get out of it," said one or two.

But the young chap in question turned on them with a flash of his white teeth. "Don't you worry yourselves!" he said. "If he wants to fight—let him!"

They muttered uneasily in answer. It was plain that Samson's bull-strength was no allegory to them. But the boy's confidence remained quite unimpaired. He faced his adversary with the lust of battle in his eyes.

"Come on, you slacker!" he said. "I like a good fight. Don't keep me waiting!"

The bystanders began to laugh, and the man they called Samson turned purple with rage. He flung round furiously. "There's a yard at the back," he cried. "We'll settle it

there. I'll teach you to use your spurs on me, my young game-cock!"

"Come on, then!" said the stranger. "P'raps I shall teach you something too! You'll probably be killed, as I said before; but if you'll take the risk I have no objection."

Again the onlookers raised a laugh. They pressed round to see the face of the English boy who was so supremely unafraid. It was a very handsome face, but it was not wholly English. The eyes were too dark and too passionate, the straight brows too black, the features too finely regular. The mouth was mobile, and wayward as a woman's, but the chin might have been modelled in stone—a fighting chin, aggressive, indomitable. There was something of the ancient Roman about the whole cast of his face which, combined with that high British bearing, made him undeniably remarkable. Those who looked at him once generally turned to look again.

One of the spectators—a burly Australian farmer—pushed forward from the throng and touched his arm. "Look here, my son!" he said in an undertone. "You've no business here, and no call to fight whatever. Clear out of it—quick! Savvy? I'll cover your tracks."

The boy drew himself up with a haughty movement. Plainly for the moment he resented the advice. But the next very suddenly he smiled.

"Thanks! Don't trouble! I can hold my own and a bit over. There's no great difficulty in downing a drunken brute like that."

"Don't you be too cock-sure!" the farmer warned him. "He's a heavy weight, and he's licked bigger men than you when he's been in just the state he's in now."

But the English boy only laughed, and turned to follow his adversary.

Every man present pressed after him. A well-sustained fight, though an event of no uncommon occurrence, was a form of entertainment that never failed to attract. They crowded out to the back premises in a body, unhindered by any in authority.

A dingy back yard behind the house furnished ground for the fray. Here the spectators gathered in a ring around an arc of light thrown by a stable-lamp over the door, and the

man they called Samson proceeded with savage energy to strip to the waist.

The young stranger's face grew a shade more disdainful as he noted the action. He himself removed coat, waistcoat, and collar, all of which he handed to the farmer who had offered to assist him in making good his escape.

"Just look after these for a minute!" he said.

"You're a cool hand," said the other man admiringly. "I'll see you don't get bullied anyhow."

The young man nodded his thanks. He looked down at his hands and slowly clenched and opened them again.

"Oh, I shan't be bullied," he said, in a tone of grim conviction.

And then the fight began.

It was obvious from the outset that it could not be a very prolonged one. Samson attacked with furious zest. He evidently expected to find his opponent very speedily at his mercy, and he made no attempt to husband his strength. But his blows went wide. The English lad avoided them with an agility that kept him practically unscathed. Had he been a hard hitter, he might have got in several blows himself, but he only landed one or two. His face was set and white as a marble mask in which only the eyes lived—eyes that watched with darting intensity for the chance to close. And when that chance came he took it so suddenly and so unexpectedly that not one of the hard-breathing, silent crowd around him saw exactly how he gained his hold. One moment he was avoiding a smashing, right-handed blow; the next he had his adversary locked in a grip of iron, the while he bent and strained for the mastery.

From then onwards an element that was terrible became apparent in the conflict. From a simple fisticuff it developed into a deadly struggle between skilled strength and strength that was merely brutal. Silently, with heaving, convulsive movements, the two struggling figures swayed to and fro. One of Samson's arms was imprisoned in that unyielding clutch. The other rained blows upon his adversary's head and shoulders that produced no further effect than if they had been bestowed upon cast-iron.

The grip of the boy's arms only grew tighter and tighter with snake-like force, while a dreadful smile came into the young face and became stamped there, engraved in rigid

lines. His lower lip was caught between his teeth, and a thin stream of blood ran from it over the smooth, clean-cut chin. It was the only sign he gave that he was putting forth the whole of his strength.

A murmur of surprise that had in it a note of uneasiness began to run through the ring of onlookers. They had seen many a fight before, but never a fight like this. Samson's face had gone from red to purple. His eyes had begun to start. Quite plainly he also was taken by surprise. Desperately, with a streaming forehead, he changed his tactics. He had no skill. Until that day he had relied upon superior strength and weight to bring him victorious through every casual fray; and they had never before failed him. But that merciless, suffocating hold compelled him to abandon offensive measures to effect his escape. He stopped his wild and futile hammering and with his one free hand he grasped the back of his opponent's neck.

The move was practically inevitable, but its effect was such as only one anticipated. That one was his adversary, who slowly bent under his weight as though overcome thereby, shifting his grip lower and lower till it almost looked as if he were about to collapse altogether. But just as the breaking-point seemed to be reached there came a change. He gathered himself together and with gigantic exertion began to straighten his bent muscles. Slowly but irresistibly he heaved his enemy upwards. There came a moment of desperate, confused struggle; and then, as the man lost his balance at last, he relaxed his grip quite suddenly, flinging him headlong over his shoulder.

It was a clean throw, contrived with masterly assurance, the result of deliberate and trained calculation. The bully pitched upon his head on the rough stones of the yard, and turned a complete somersault with the violence of his fall.

A shout of amazement went up from the spectators. This end of the struggle was totally unexpected.

The successful combatant remained standing with the sweat pouring from his face and the blood still running down his chin. He stretched out his arms with a slow, mechanical movement as if to test the condition of his muscles after the tremendous strain he had put upon them. Then, still as it were mechanically, he felt the torn collar-band of his shirt,

with speculative fingers. Finally he whirled round on his heels and stared at the huddled form of his fallen foe.

A shabby little man with thick, sandy eyebrows had gone to his assistance, but he lay quite motionless in a twisted, ungainly attitude. The flare of the lamp was reflected in his glassy, upturned eyes. Dumbly his conqueror stood staring down at him. He seemed to stand above them all in that his moment of dreadful victory.

He spoke at length, and through his voice there ran a curious tremor as of a man a little giddy, a little dazed by immense and appalling height.

"I thought I could do it!" he said. "I—thought I could!"

It was his moment of triumph, of irresistible elation. The devil in him had fought—and conquered.

It swayed him—and passed. He was left white to the lips and suddenly, terribly afraid.

"What have I done to him?" he asked, and the tremor was gone from his voice; it was level, dead level. "I haven't killed him really, have I?"

No one answered him. They were crowding round the fallen man, stooping over him with awe-struck whispering, straightening the crumpled, inert limbs, trying to place the heavy frame in a natural posture.

The boy pressed forward to look, but abruptly his supporter caught him by the shoulder and pulled him back.

"No, no!" he said in a sharp undertone. "You're no good here. Get out of it! Put on your clothes and—go!"

He spoke urgently. The boy stared at him, suffering the compelling hand. All the fight had gone completely out of him. He was passive with the paralysis of a great horror.

The farmer helped him into his clothes, and himself removed the blood-stain from the lad's dazed face. "Don't be a fool!" he urged. "Pull yourself together and clear out! This thing was an accident. I'll engineer it."

"Accident!" The boy straightened himself sharply with the movement of one brought roughly to his senses. "I suppose the throw broke his neck," he said. "But it was no accident. I did it on purpose. I told him I should probably kill him, but he would have it." He turned and squarely faced the other. "I don't know what I ought to

do," he said, speaking more collectedly, "but I'm certainly not going to bolt."

The farmer nodded with brief comprehension. He had the steady eyes of a man accustomed to the wide spaces of the earth. "That's all right," he said, and took him firmly by the arm. "You come with me. My name is Crowther. We'll have a talk outside. There's more room there. You've got to listen to reason. Come!"

He almost dragged the boy away with the words. No one intercepted or spoke a word to delay them. Together they passed back through the empty drinking-saloon—the boy with his colourless face and set lips, the man with his resolute, far-seeing eyes—and so into the dim roadway beyond.

They left the lights of the reeking bar behind. The spacious night closed in upon them.

PART I

THE GATES OF BRASS

CHAPTER I

A JUG OF WATER

IT was certainly not Cæsar's fault. Cæsar was as well-meaning a Dalmatian as ever scampered in the wake of a cantering horse. And if Mike, in his headlong Irish fashion, chose to regard the scamper as a gross personal insult, that was surely not a matter for which he could reasonably be held responsible. And yet it was upon the luckless Cæsar that the wrath of the gods descended as a consequence of Mike's wrong-headed deductions.

It began with a rush and a snarl from the Vicarage gate and it had developed into a set and deadly battle almost before either of the combatants had fully realized the other.

The rider drew rein, yelling furiously; but his yells were about as effectual as the wail of an infant. Neither animal was so much as aware of his existence in those moments of delirious warfare. They were locked already in that silent, swaying grip which every fighting dog with any knowledge of the great game seeks to establish, to break which mere humans may put forth their utmost strength in vain.

The struggle was a desperate and a bloody one, and it speedily became apparent to the rider that he would have to dismount if he intended to put an end to it.

Fiercely he flung himself off his horse and threw the reins over the Vicarage gate-post. Then, riding-crop in hand, he approached the swaying, fighting animals. It was like a ghastly wrestling-match. Both were on their feet, struggling to and fro, each with jaws hard gripped upon the other's neck, each silent save for his spasmodic efforts to breathe.

"Stop it, damn you!" shouted the rider, slashing at them with the zeal of unrestrained fury. "Cæsar, you infernal brute, stop it, will you? I'll kill you if you don't!"

But Cæsar was deaf to all threats and quite unconscious

of the fact that his master, and not his enemy, was responsible for the flail-like strokes of the whirling lash. They shifted from beneath it instinctively, but they fought deliriously on.

And at that the man with the whip completely lost his self-control. He set to work to thrash and thrash the fighting animals till one or other of them—or himself—should become exhausted.

It developed into a horrible competition organized and conducted by the man's blind fury, and in what fashion it would have ended it would be hard to say. But, luckily for all three, there came at length an interruption. Someone—a woman—came swiftly out of the Vicarage garden, carrying a bedroom jug. She advanced without a pause upon the seething, infuriated group.

"It's no good beating them," she said, in a voice which, though somewhat hurried, was one of clear command. "Get out of the way, and be ready to catch your dog when they come apart!"

The man glanced round for an instant, his face white with passion. "I'll kill the brutes!" he declared.

"Indeed you won't!" she returned promptly. "Stand away now or you will be drenched!"

She raised her jug as she spoke above the struggling animals. Her face also shone white in the wintry dusk, but her actions denoted unwavering resolution.

"Now!" she said; and, since he would not move, she flung the icy water without compunction over the dogs and him also.

"Damnation!" he cried violently.

But she broke in upon him. "Quick! Quick! Now's the time! Grab your dog! I'll catch Mike!"

The urgency of the order compelled compliance. Almost in spite of himself he stooped to obey. And so it came to pass that five seconds later Cæsar was being mercilessly thrashed by his enraged master, while the real culprit was being dragged, cursing breathlessly, from the scene.

It was a brutal thrashing, and wholly undeserved. Cæsar, awaking to the horror of it, howled his anguish; but no amount of protest on his part made the smallest impression upon the wielder of the whip. It continued to descend upon his writhing body with crashing force, till he rolled upon the ground in agony.

Even then the punishment would not have ceased, but for a second interruption. It was the woman from the Vicarage garden again; but she burst upon the scene this time with something of the effect of an avalanche. She literally whirled between the man and his victim. She caught his upraised arm.

"Oh, you brute!" she cried. "You brute!"

He stiffened in her hold. They stood face to face. Cæsar crept whining and shivering to the side of the road.

Slowly the man's arm fell to his side, still caught in that quivering grasp. He spoke in a voice that struggled boyishly between resentment and shame. "The dog's my own."

Her hold relaxed. "Even a dog has his rights," she said. "Give me that whip, please!"

He looked at her oddly in the growing darkness. She was trembling as she stood, but she held her ground.

"Please!" she repeated with resolution.

With an abrupt movement he put the weapon into her hand. "Are you going to give me a taste?" he asked.

She uttered a queer little gasping laugh. "No. I—I'm not that sort. But—it's horrible to see a man lose control of himself. And to thrash a dog—like that!"

She turned sharply from him and went to the Dalmatian, who crouched quaking on the path. He wagged an ingratiating tail at her approach. It was evident that in her hand the whip had no terrors for him. He crept fawning to her feet.

She stooped over him, fondling his head. "Oh, poor boy! Poor boy!" she said.

The dog's master came and stood beside her. "He'll be all right," he said, in a tone of half-surly apology.

"I'm afraid Mike has bitten him," she said. "See!" displaying a long, dark streak on Cæsar's neck.

"He'll be all right," repeated Cæsar's master. "I hope your dog is none the worse."

"No, I don't think so," she said. "But don't you think we ought to bathe this?"

"I'll take him home," he said. "They'll see to him at the stables."

She stood up, a slim, erect figure, the whip still firmly grasped in her hand. "You won't thrash him any more, will you?" she said.

He gave a short laugh. "No, you have cooled me down quite effectually. I'm much obliged to you for interfering. And I'm sorry I used language, but as the circumstances were exceptional, I hope you will make allowances."

His tone was boyish still, but all the resentment had gone out of it. There was a touch of arrogance in his bearing which was obviously natural to him, but his apology was none the less sincere.

The slim figure on the path made a slight movement of dismay. "But you must be drenched to the skin!" she said. "I was forgetting. Won't you come in and get dry?"

He hunched his shoulders expressively. "No, thanks. It was my own fault, as you kindly omit to mention. I must be getting back to the Abbey. My grandfather is expecting me. He fidgets if I'm late."

He raised a hand to his cap, and would have turned away, but she made a swift gesture of surprise, which arrested him. "Oh, you are young Mr. Evesham!—I beg your pardon—you are Mr. Evesham! I thought I must have seen you before!"

He stopped with a laugh. "I am commonly called 'Master Piers' in this neighbourhood. They won't let me grow up. Rather a shame—what? I'm nearly twenty-five, and the head keeper still refers to me in private as 'that dratted boy.'"

She laughed for the first time. Possibly he had angled for that laugh. "Yes, it is a shame!" she agreed. "But then Sir Beverley is rather old, isn't he? No doubt it's the comparison that does it."

"He isn't old," said Piers Evesham in sharp contradiction. "He's only seventy-four. That's not old for an Evesham. He'll go for another twenty years. There's a saying in our family that if we don't die violently, we never die at all." He pulled himself up abruptly. "I've given you my name and history. Won't you tell me yours?"

She hesitated momentarily. "I am only the mother's help at the Vicarage," she said then.

"By Jove! I don't envy you." He looked at her with frank interest notwithstanding. "I suppose you do it for a living," he remarked. "Personally, I'd sooner sweep a crossing than live in the same house with that mouthing parson."

"Hush!" she said, but her lips smiled as she said it—a small smile that would not be denied. "I must go in now. Here you are!" She gave him back his whip. "Good-bye! Get home quick—and change!"

He turned half reluctantly; then paused. "You might tell me your name, anyway," he said.

She had begun to move away, light-footed, swift as a bird. She also paused.

"My name is Denys," she said.

He put his hand to his cap again. "Miss Denys?"

"No. Mrs. Denys. Good-bye!"

She was gone. He heard the light feet running up the wet gravel drive and then the quick opening of a door. It closed again immediately, with decision, and he stood alone in the wintry dusk.

Cæsar crept to him and grovelled abjectly in the mud. The young man stood motionless, staring at the Vicarage gates, a slight frown between his brows. He was not tall, but he had the free pose of an athlete and the bearing of a prince.

Suddenly he glanced down at his cringing companion and broke into a laugh. "Get up, Cæsar, you fool! And think yourself lucky that you've got any sound bones left! You'd have been reduced to a jelly by this time if I'd had my way."

He bent with careless good-nature, and patted the miscreant; then turned towards his horse.

"Poor old Pompey! A shame to keep you standing! All that brute's fault." He swung himself into the saddle. "By Jove, though, she's got some pluck!" he said. "I like a woman with pluck!"

He touched his animal with the spur, and in a moment they were speeding through the gathering dark at a brisk canter. Pompey was as anxious to get home as was his master, and he needed no second urging. He scarcely waited to get within the gates of the park before he gathered himself together and went like the wind. His rider lay forward in the saddle and yelled encouragement like a wild Indian. Cæsar raced behind them like a hare.

The mad trio went like a flash past old Marshall, the head keeper, who stood gun on shoulder at the gate of his lodge and looked after them with stern disapproval.

"Drat the boy! What's he want to ride hell-for-leather

like that for?" he grumbled. "He'll go and kill himself one of these days, as his father did before him."

It was just twenty-five years since Piers' father had been carried dead into Marshall's cottage, and Marshall had stumped up the long avenue to bear the news to Sir Beverley. Piers was about the same age now as that other Piers had been, and Marshall had no mind to take part in a similar tragedy. It had been a bitter task, that of telling Sir Beverley that his only son was dead; but to have borne him ill tidings of his grandson would have been infinitely harder. For Sir Beverley had never loved his son through the whole of his brief, tempestuous life; but his grandson was the very core of his existence, as everyone knew, despite his strenuous efforts to disguise the fact.

No, emphatically, Marshall had not the faintest desire to have to inform the old man that harm had befallen Master Piers, and his frown deepened as he trudged up his little garden and heard the yelling voice and galloping hoofs grow faint in the distance.

"The boy is madder even than his father was," he muttered darkly. "Bad stock! Bad stock!"

He shook his head over the words, and went within. He was the only man left on the estate who could remember the beautiful young Italian bride whom Sir Beverley had once upon a time brought to reign there. It had been a short, short reign, and no one spoke of it now—least of all, the old, bent man who ruled like a feudal lord at Rodding Abbey, and of whom even the redoubtable Marshall himself stood in awe.

But Marshall remembered her well, and it was upon that dazzling memory that his thoughts dwelt when he gave utterance to his mysterious verdict. For was not Master Piers the living image of her? Had he not the same imperial bearing and regal turn of the head? Did not the Evesham blood run the hotter in his veins for that passionate Southern strain that mingled with it?

Marshall sometimes wondered how Sir Beverley, with his harsh intolerance, brooked the living likeness of the boy to the woman in whose bitter memory he hated all women. It was scarcely possible that he blinded himself to it. It was too vividly apparent for that. "A perpetual eyesore," Marshall termed it in private. But then there was no

accounting for the ways of folk in high places. Marshall did not pretend to understand them. He was, in his own grumpy fashion, sincerely attached to his master, and he never presumed to criticize his doings. He only wondered at them.

As for Master Piers, he had been an unmitigated nuisance to him personally ever since he had learned to walk alone. Marshall had always disapproved of him, and he hated Victor, the French valet, who had brought him up from his cradle. Yet deep in his surly old heart there lurked a certain grudging affection for him, notwithstanding. The boy had a winning way with him, and but for his hatred of Victor, who was soft and womanish, but extremely tenacious, Marshall would have liked to have had a hand in his upbringing. As it was, he could only look on from afar and condemn the vagaries of "that dratted boy," prophesying disaster whenever he saw him, and hoping that Sir Beverley might not live to see it. Certainly it seemed as if Piers bore a charmed life, for, like his father before him, he risked it practically every day. With sublime self-confidence. he laughed at caution, ever choosing the shortest cut, whatever it might entail; and it was remarkably seldom that he came to grief.

As he clattered into the stable-yard on that dark November evening, his face was sparkling with excitement as though he had drunk strong wine. The animal he rode was covered with foam, and danced a springy war-dance on the stones. Cæsar trotted in behind them with tail erect and a large smile of satisfaction on his spotty face, despite the gory streak upon his neck.

"Confound it! I'm late!" said Piers, throwing his leg over his horse's neck. "It's all that brute's fault. Look at him grinning! Better wash him one of you! He can't come in in that state." He slipped to the ground and stamped his sodden feet. "I'm not much better off myself. What a beastly night, to be sure!"

"Yes, you're wet, sir!" remarked the groom at Pompey's head. "Had a tumble, sir?"

"No. Had a jug of water thrown over me," laughed Piers. "Cæsar will tell you all about it. He's been sniggering all the way home." He snapped his fingers in the dog's complacent face. "By Jove!" he said to him, "I couldn't

grin like that if I'd had the thrashing you've had. And I couldn't kiss the hand that did it either. You're a gentleman, Cæsar, and I humbly apologize. Look after him, Phipps! He's been a bit mauled. Good night! Good night, Pompey lad! You've carried me well." He patted the horse's foam-flecked neck, and turned away.

As he left the stable-yard, he was whistling light-heartedly, and Phipps glanced at a colleague with a slight flicker of one eyelid.

"Wonder who chucked that jug of water!" he said.

CHAPTER II

CONCERNING FOOLS

IN the huge, oak-panelled hall of the Abbey, Sir Beverley Evesham sat alone.

A splendid fire of logs blazed before him on the open hearth, and the light from a great chandelier beat mercilessly down upon him. His hair was thick still and silvery white. He had the shoulders of a strong man, albeit they were slightly bowed. His face, clean-shaven, aristocratic, was the colour of old ivory. The thin lips were quite bloodless. They had a downward, bitter curve, as though they often sneered at life. The eyes were keen as a bird's, stone-grey under overhanging black brows.

He held a newspaper in one bony hand, but he was not apparently reading, for his eyes were fixed. The shining suits of armour, standing like sentinels on each side of the fireplace, were not more rigid than he.

There came a slight sound from the other end of the hall, and instantly and very sharply Sir Beverley turned his head.

"Piers!"

Cheerily Piers' voice made answer. He shut the door behind him and came forward as he spoke. "Here I am, sir! I'm sorry I'm late. You shouldn't have waited. You never ought to wait. I'm never in at the right time."

"Confound you, why aren't you, then?" burst forth Sir Beverley. "It's easy to say you're sorry, isn't it?"

"Not always," said Piers.

He came to the old man, bent down over him, slid a boyish

arm around the bent shoulders. "Don't be waxy!" he coaxed. "I couldn't help it this time."

"Get away, do!" said Sir Beverley, jerking himself irritably from him. "I detest being pawed about, as you very well know. In heaven's name, have your tea, if you want it! I shan't touch any. It's past my time."

"Oh, rot!" said Piers. "If you don't, I shan't."

"Yes, you will." Sir Beverley pointed an imperious hand towards a table on the other side of the fire. "Go and get it and don't be a fool!"

"I'm not a fool," said Piers.

"Yes, you are—a damn' fool!" Sir Beverley returned to his newspaper with the words. "And you'll never be anything else!" he growled into the silence that succeeded them.

Piers clattered the tea-things and said nothing. There was no resentment visible upon his sensitive, olive face, however. He looked perfectly contented. He turned round after a few seconds with a cup of steaming tea in his hand. He crossed the hearth and set it on the table at Sir Beverley's elbow.

"That's just as you like it, sir," he urged. "Have it—just to please me!"

"Take it away!" said Sir Beverley, without raising his eyes.

"It's only ten minutes late, after all," said Piers, with all meekness. "I wish you hadn't waited, though it was jolly decent of you. You weren't anxious, of course? You know I always turn up some time."

"Anxious!" echoed Sir Beverley. "About a cub like you! You flatter yourself, my good Piers."

Piers laughed a little and stooped over the blaze. Sir Beverley read on for a few moments, then very suddenly and not without violence crumpled his paper and flung it on the ground.

"Of all the infernal, ridiculous twaddle!" he exclaimed. "Now what the devil have you done to yourself? Been taking a water-jump?"

Piers turned round. "No, sir. It's nothing. I shouldn't have come in in this state, only it was late, and I thought I'd better report myself."

"Nothing!" repeated Sir Beverley. "Why, you're

drenched to the skin! Go and change! Go and change! Don't stop to argue! Do you hear me, sir? Go and change!"

He shouted the last words, and Piers flung round on his heel with a hint of impatience.

"And behave yourself!" Sir Beverley threw after him. "If you think I'll stand any impertinence from you, you were never more mistaken in your life. Be off with you, you cheeky young hound! Don't let me see you again till you're fit to be seen!"

Piers departed without a backward look. His lips were slightly compressed as he went up the stairs, but before he reached his own room they were softly whistling.

Victor, the valet, who was busily employed in laying out his evening clothes, received him with hands upraised in horror.

"*Ah, mais, Monsieur Pierre*, how you are wet!"

"Yes, I want a bath," said Piers. "Get it quick! I must be down again in ten minutes. So scurry, Victor, my lad!"

Victor was a cheery little rotundity of five-and-fifty. He had had the care of Piers ever since the first fortnight of that young man's existence, and he worshipped him with a whole-hearted devotion that was in its way sublime. In his eyes Piers could do no wrong. He was, in fact, dearer to him than his own flesh and blood.

He prepared the bath with deft celerity, and hastened back to assist in removing his young master's boots. He exclaimed dramatically upon their soaked condition, but Piers was in too great a hurry to give any details regarding the cause of his plight. He whirled into the bathroom at express speed, and was out again almost before Victor had had time to collect his drenched garments.

Ten minutes after his departure he returned to the hall, the gay whistle still on his lips, and trod a careless measure to its tune as he advanced.

Sir Beverley got up stiffly from his knees on the hearthrug and turned a scowling face. "Well, are you decent now?"

"Quite," said Piers. He smiled as he said it, a boyish, disarming smile. "Have you had your tea, sir? Oh, I say, what a brick you are! I didn't expect that."

His eyes, travelling downwards, had caught sight of a cup pushed close to the blaze, and a plate of crumpets beside it.

"Or deserve it," said Sir Beverley grimly.

Piers turned impulsively and took him by the shoulders. "You're a dear old chap!" he said. "Thanks awfully!"

Against its will the hard old mouth relaxed. "There, boy, there! What an infant you are! Sit down and have it, for goodness' sake! It'll be dinner-time before you've done."

"You've had yours?" said Piers

"Oh, yes—yes!" Irritation made itself heard again in Sir Beverley's voice; he freed himself from his grandson's hold, though not ungently. "I'm not so keen on your precious tea," he said, seating himself again. "It's only young milksops like you that have made it fashionable. When I was young——"

"Hullo!" broke in Piers. He had picked up the cup of tea and was sniffing it suspiciously. "You've been doctoring this!" he said.

"You drink it!" ordered Sir Beverley peremptorily. "I'm not going to have you laid up with rheumatic fever if I know it. Drink it, Piers! Do you hear?"

Piers looked for a moment as if he were on the verge of rebellion, then abruptly he raised the cup to his lips and drained it. He set it down with a shudder of distaste.

"You might have let me have 'em separate," he remarked. "Tea and brandy don't blend well. I shall sleep like a hog after this. Besides, I shouldn't have had rheumatic fever. It's not my way. Anything in the paper to-night?"

"Yes," said Sir Beverley disgustedly. "There's that prize-fight business."

"What's that?" Piers looked up with quick interest.

"Surely you saw it!" returned Sir Beverley. "That fellow Adderley—killed his man in a wrestling match. A good many people said it was done by a foul."

"Adderley!" repeated Piers. "I know him. He gave me some quite useful tips once. What happened? It's the first I've heard of it."

"Well, he's a murderer," said Sir Beverley. "And he deserves to be hanged. He killed his man—whether by a foul or not I can't say; but, anyway, he meant to kill him. It's obvious on the face of it. But they chose to bring it in manslaughter, and he's only got five years; while some brainless fool must needs write an article a column and a

half long to protest against the disgraceful practice of permitting wrestling or boxing matches, which are a survival of the Dark Ages and a perpetual menace to our civilization! A survival of your grandmother! A nice set of nincompoops the race will develop into if such fools as that get their way! We're soft enough as it is, Heaven knows. Why couldn't they hang the scoundrel as he deserved? That's the surest way of putting an end to savagery. But to stop the sport altogether! It would be tomfoolery!"

Piers picked up the paper from the floor and smoothed it out. He proceeded to study it with drawn brows, and Sir Beverley sat and watched him with that in his stone-grey eyes which no one was ever allowed to see.

"Eat your crumpets, boy!" he said at last.

"What?" Piers glanced up momentarily. "Oh, all right, sir, in a minute. This is rather an interesting case—what? You see, Adderley was a friend of mine."

"When did you meet him?" demanded Sir Beverley.

"I knew him in my school days. He spent a whole term in the neighbourhood. It was just before I left for my year of travel. I got to know him rather well. He gave me several hints on wrestling."

"Did he teach you how to break your opponent's neck?" asked Sir Beverley dryly.

Piers made a slight, scarcely perceptible movement of one hand. It clenched upon the paper he held. "They were—worth knowing," he said, with his eyes upon the sheet. "But I should have thought he was too old a hand himself to get into trouble."

Sir Beverley grunted. Piers read on. At the end of a lengthy pause he laid the paper aside. "I'm beastly rude," he remarked. "Have a crumpet!"

"Eat 'em yourself!" said Sir Beverley. "I hate 'em!"

Piers picked up the plate and began to eat. He stared at the blaze as he did so, obviously lost in thought.

"Don't dream!" said Sir Beverley sharply.

He turned his eyes upon his grandfather's face—those soft Italian eyes of his so suggestive of hidden fire. "I wasn't—dreaming," he said slowly. "I wonder why you think Adderley ought to be hanged."

"Because he's a murderer," snapped Sir Beverley.

"Yes; but——" said Piers, and became silent, as though he were following out some train of thought.

"Go on, boy! Finish!" commanded Sir Beverley. "I detest a sentence left in the middle."

"I was only thinking," said Piers deliberately, "that hanging in my opinion is much the easier sentence of the two. I should ask to be hanged if I were Adderley."

"Would you indeed?" Sir Beverley sounded supremely contemptuous.

But Piers did not seem to notice. "Besides, there are so many murderers in the world," he said, "though it's only the few who get punished. I'm sorry for the few myself. It's damned bad luck, human nature being what it is."

"You don't know what you're talking about," said Sir Beverley.

"All right; let's talk about something else!" said Piers. "Cæsar had a glorious mill with that Irish terrier brute at the Vicarage this afternoon. I couldn't separate 'em, so I just joined in. We'd have been at it now if we had been left to our own devices." He broke into his sudden boyish laugh. "But a kind lady came out of the Vicarage garden and flung the contents of a bedroom jug over the three of us. Rather plucky of her—what? I'm afraid I wasn't over-complimentary at the moment, but I've had time since to appreciate her tact and presence of mind. I'm going over to thank her to-morrow."

"Who was it?" growled Sir Beverley suspiciously. "Not that little white owl, Mrs. Lorimer?"

"Mrs. Lorimer! Great Scott, no! She'd have squealed and run to the Reverend Stephen for protection. No, this was a woman, not an owl. Her name is Denys—Mrs. Denys, she was careful to inform me. They've started a mother's help at the Vicarage. None too soon, I should say. Who wouldn't be a mother's help in that establishment?"

Sir Beverley uttered a dry laugh. "Daresay she knows how to feather her own nest. Most of 'em do."

"She knows how to keep her head in an emergency, anyhow," remarked Piers.

"Feline instinct," jeered Sir Beverley.

Piers looked across with a laugh in his dark eyes. "And feline pluck, sir," he maintained.

Sir Beverley scowled at him. He could never brook an

argument. "Oh, get away, Piers!" he said. "You talk like a fool."

Piers turned his whole attention to devouring crumpets, and there fell a lengthy silence. He rose finally to set down his empty plate and help himself to some more tea.

"That stuff is poisonous by now," said Sir Beverley.

"It won't poison me," said Piers.

He drank it, and returned to the hearth-rug. "I suppose I may smoke?" he said, with a touch of restraint.

Sir Beverley was lying back in his chair, gazing straight up at him. Suddenly he reached out a trembling hand.

"You're a good boy, Piers," he said. "You may do any damn' thing you like."

Piers' eyes kindled in swift response. He gripped the extended hand. "You're a brick, sir!" he said. "Look here! Come along to the billiard-room and have a hundred up! It'll give you an appetite for dinner."

He hoisted the old man out of his chair before he could begin to protest. They stood together before the great fire, and Sir Beverley straightened his stiff limbs. He was half a head taller than his grandson.

"What a fellow it is!" he said, half laughing. "Why can't you sit still and be quiet? Don't you want to read the paper? I've done with it."

"So have I," said Piers. He swept it up with one hand as he spoke and tossed it recklessly on to the blaze. "Come along, sir! We haven't much time."

"Now what did you do that for?" demanded Sir Beverley, pausing. "Do you want to set the house on fire? What did you do it for, Piers?"

"Because I was a fool," said Piers, with sudden, curious vehemence. "A damn' fool, sir, if you want to know. But it's done now. Let it burn!"

The paper flared fiercely and crumbled to ashes. Sir Beverley suffered himself to be drawn away.

"You're a queer fellow, Piers," he said. "But, taking 'em altogether, I should say there are a good many bigger fools in the world than you."

"Thank you, sir," said Piers.

CHAPTER III

DISCIPLINE

"MRS. DENYS, may I come in?" Jeanie Lorimer's small, delicate face peeped round the door. "I've brought my French exercise to do," she said, half apologetically. "I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind."

"Of course come in, dear child! I like to have you." The mother's help paused in her rapid stitching to look up with a smile at the pretty, brown-haired child. "Come close to the light!" she said. "I hope it isn't a very long one; is it?"

"It is—rather," Jeanie sighed a sharp, involuntary sigh. "I ought to have done it sooner, but I was busy with the little ones. Is that Gracie's frock you're mending? What an awful tear!" She came and stood by Mrs. Denys's side, speaking in a low, rather monotonous voice. A heavy strand of her hair fell over the work as she bent to look; she tossed it back with another sigh. "Gracie is such a tomboy," she said. "It's a pity, isn't it?"

"My dear, you're tired," said Mrs. Denys gently. She put a motherly arm about the slim body that leaned against her, looking up into the pale young face with eyes of kindly criticism.

"A little tired," said Jeanie.

"I shouldn't do that exercise to-night, if I were you," said Mrs. Denys. "You will find it easier in the morning. Lie down on the sofa here and have a little rest till supper-time!"

"Oh, no, I mustn't," said Jeanie. "Father will never let any of us go to bed till the day's work is done."

"But surely, when you're really tired——" began Mrs. Denys.

But Jeanie shook her head. "No; thank you very much, I must do it. Olive did hers long ago."

"Where is Olive?" asked Mrs. Denys.

"She's reading a story-book downstairs. We may always read when we've finished our lessons." Again came that short, unconscious sigh. Jeanie went to the table and sat down. "Mother is rather upset to-night," she said, as she

turned the leaves of her book. "Ronald and Julian have been smoking, and she is so afraid that Father will find out. I hope he won't—for her sake. But if they don't eat any supper, he is sure to notice. He flogged Julian two nights running the last time, because he told a lie about it."

A quick remark rose to her listener's lips, but it was suppressed unuttered. Mrs. Denys began to stitch very rapidly, with her face bent over her work. It was a very charming face, with level grey eyes, wide apart, and a mouth of great sweetness. There was a fugitive dimple on one side of it that gave her a girlish appearance when she smiled. But she was not a girl. There was about her an air of quiet confidence as of one who knew something of the world and its ways. She was young still, and it was yet in her to be ardent; but she had none of the giddy restlessness of youth. Avery Denys was a woman who had left her girlhood wholly behind her. Her enthusiasm and her impulses were kindled at a steadier flame than the flickering torch of youth. There was no romance left in her life, but yet was she without bitterness. She had known suffering and faced it unblenching. The only mark it had left upon her was that air of womanly knowledge that clothed her like a garment even in her lightest moods. Of a quick understanding and yet quicker sympathy, she had learned to hold her emotions in check, and the natural gaiety of her hid much that was too sacred to be carelessly displayed. She had a ready sense of humour that had buoyed her up through many a storm, and the brave heart behind it never flinched from disaster. As her father had said of her in the long-ago days of happiness and prosperity, she took her hedges straight.

For several minutes after Jeanie's weary little confidence she worked in silence; then suddenly, with needle poised, she looked across at the child.

Jeanie's head was bent over her exercise-book. Her hair lay in a heavy mass all about her shoulders. There was a worried frown between her brows. Slowly her hand travelled across the page, paused, wrote a word or two, paused again.

Suddenly from the room above them there came the shrill shriek of a violin. It wailed itself into silence, and then broke forth again in a series of long-drawn-out whines. Jeanie sighed.

Avery laid down her work with quiet decision, and went to

her side. "What is worrying you, dear?" she asked gently. "I'm not a great French scholar, but I think I may be able to help."

"Thank you," said Jeanie, in her voice of tired courtesy. "You mustn't help me. No one must."

"I can find the words you don't know in the dictionary," said Avery.

"No, thank you," said Jeanie. "Father doesn't like us to have help of any kind."

There were deep shadows about the eyes she raised to Avery's face, but they smiled quite bravely, with all-unconscious wistfulness.

Avery laid a tender hand upon the brown head and drew it to rest against her. "Poor little thing!" she said compassionately.

"But I'm not little, really, you know," said Jeanie, closing her eyes for a few stolen moments. "I'm thirteen in March. And they're all younger than me, except Ronnie and Julian."

Avery bent with a swift, maternal movement, and kissed the blue-veined forehead. Jeanie opened her eyes in slight surprise. Quite plainly she was not accustomed to sudden [illegible].

"I'm glad we've got you, Mrs. Denys," she said, with her quiet air of childish dignity. "You are a great help to us."

She turned back to her French exercise with the words, and Avery, after a moment's thought, turned to the door. She heard again the child's sigh of weariness as she closed it behind her.

The wails of the violin were very audible in the passage outside. She shivered at the atrocious sounds. From a further distance there came the screams of an indignant baby, and the strident shouts of two small boys who were racing to and fro in an uncarpeted room at the top of the house. But after that one shiver, Avery Denys had no further attention to bestow upon any of these things. She went with her quick, light tread down to the square hall, which gave a suggestion of comfort to the Vicarage which not one of its rooms endorsed.

Without an instant's hesitation she knocked upon the first door she came to. A voice within gave her permission to enter, and she did so.

The Reverend Stephen Lorimer turned from his writing-

table with a face of dignified severity to receive her, but at sight of her his expression changed somewhat.

"Ah, Mrs. Denys! You, is it? Pray come in!" he said urbanely. "Is there any way in which I can be of service to you?"

His eyes were dark and very small, so small that they nearly disappeared when he smiled. But for this slight defect, Mr. Lorimer would have been a handsome man. He rose as Avery approached and placed a chair for her with elaborate courtesy.

"Thank you," she said. "I only ran in for a moment—just to tell you that little Jeanie is so tired to-night. She has had no time for her lessons all the afternoon, because she has been helping with the little ones in the nursery. She insists upon doing her French exercise, but I am sure you would not wish her to do it if you knew how worn out the child is. May I tell her to leave it for to-night?"

She spoke quickly and very earnestly, with clear eyes raised to Mr. Lorimer's face. She watched his smile fade and his eyes reappear as she made her appeal.

He did not reply to it for some seconds, and a sharp doubt went through her. She raised her brows in mute interrogation.

"Yes, my dear Mrs. Denys," he said, in response to her unspoken query, "I see that you appreciate the fact that there are at least two points of view to every proposition. You tell me that Jeanne was occupied in the nursery during that period of the day which should legitimately have been set aside for the assimilation of learning. I presume her presence there was voluntary?"

"Oh, quite." There was a hint of sharpness in Avery's rejoinder. "She went out of the goodness of her heart because Nurse had been up practically all night with baby, and needed a rest, and I was obliged to go into Wardenhurst for Mrs. Lorimer. So Jeanie took charge of Bertie and David, and Gracie and Pat went with me."

Mr. Lorimer waved a protesting hand. "Pray spare yourself and me all these details, Mrs. Denys! I am glad to know that Jeanne has been useful to you, but at the same time she has no right to offer duty upon the altar of kindness. You will acknowledge that to obey is better than sacrifice. As a matter of principle, I fear I cannot remit any of her task, and

I trust that on the next occasion she will remember to set duty first."

A hot flush had risen in Avery's face and her eyes sparkled, but she restrained herself. There was no indignation in her voice as she said, "Mr. Lorimer, believe me, that child will never shirk her duty. She is far too conscientious. It is really for the sake of her health that I came to beg you to let her off that French exercise. I am sure she is not strong. Perhaps I did wrong to let her be in the nursery this afternoon, though I scarcely know how else we could have managed. But that is my fault, not hers. I take full responsibility for that."

Mr. Lorimer began to smile again. "That is very generous of you," he said. "But, as a matter of justice, I doubt if the whole burden of it should fall to your share. You presumably were unaware that Jeanne's afternoon should have been devoted to her studies. She cannot plead a like ignorance. Therefore, while dismissing the petition, I hold you absolved from any blame in the matter. Pray do not distress yourself any further!"

"I certainly thought it was a half-holiday," Avery admitted. "But I am distressed—very greatly distressed—on the child's account. She is not fit for work to-night."

Mr. Lorimer made an airy gesture expressive of semi-humorous regret. "Discipline, my dear Mrs. Denys, must be maintained at all costs—even among the members of your charming sex. As a matter of fact, I am waiting to administer punishment to one of my sons at the present moment for an act of disobedience."

He glanced towards the writing-table on which lay a cane, and again the quick blood mounted in Avery's face.

"Oh, don't you think you are a little hard on your children?" she said; and then impulsively, "No; forgive me! I ought not to put it like that. But do you find it answers to be so strict? Does it make them any more obedient?"

He raised his shoulders slightly; his eyes gleamed momentarily ere they vanished into his smile. He shook his head at her with tolerant irony. "I fear your heart runs away with you, Mrs. Denys, and I must not suffer myself to listen to you. I have my duty—my very distinct duty—to perform, and I must not shirk it. As to the results, they are in other Hands than mine."

There came a low knock at the door as he finished speaking, and he turned at once to answer it.

"Come in!"

The door opened, and a very small, very nervous boy crept round it. A quick exclamation rose to Avery's lips before she could suppress it. Mr. Lorimer looked at her interrogatively.

"I was only surprised to see Pat," she explained. "He has been with me all the afternoon. I hardly thought he could have had time to get into trouble."

"Come here, Patrick!" said Mr. Lorimer.

Patrick advanced. He looked neither at Avery nor his father, but kept his eyes rigidly downcast. His freckled face had a half-frightened, half-sullen expression. He halted before Mr. Lorimer, who took him by the shoulder, and turned him round towards Avery.

"Tell Mrs. Denys what you did!" he said.

Pat shot a single glance upwards, and made laconic reply. "I undid Mike."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Avery in great distress. "I'm afraid that was my fault!"

"Yours, Mrs. Denys?" Mr. Lorimer's eyes became visible as two brilliant pin-points turned searchingly upon her face.

"Yes, mine!" she reiterated. "Mike was whining on his chain, and I said I thought it was cruel to keep a dog tied up. I suppose I ought to have kept my thoughts to myself," she said, with a pathetic little smile. "Do please forgive us both this time!"

Mr. Lorimer ignored the appeal. "And do you know what happened in consequence of his being liberated?" he asked.

"Yes, I do," ruefully she made answer. "He fought Mr. Evesham's dog and I helped to pull him off."

"You, Mrs. Denys!"

"Yes, I." She nodded. "There wasn't much damage done, anyhow to Mike. I am very, very sorry, Mr. Lorimer. But really Pat is not to blame for this. Won't you—please——"

She stopped, for very decidedly Mr. Lorimer interrupted her. "I am afraid I cannot agree with you, Mrs. Denys. You may have spoken unadvisedly, but Patrick was aware that in releasing the dog he was acting in direct opposition to my orders. Therefore he must bear his own punishment.

I must beg that for the future you will endeavour to be a little more discreet in your observations. Patrick, open the door for Mrs. Denys!"

It was a definite dismissal—perhaps the most definite that Avery had ever had in her life. A fury of resentment possessed her, but feeling her self-control to be tottering, she dared not give it vent. She turned in quivering silence and departed.

As she went out of the room, she perceived that Pat had begun to cry.

CHAPTER IV

THE MOTHER'S HELP

"IT'S always the same," moaned Mrs. Lorimer. "My poor children! They're never out of trouble."

Avery stood still. She had fled to the drawing-room to recover herself, only to find the lady of the house lying in tears upon the sofa there. Mrs. Lorimer was very small and pathetic. She had lost all her health long before in the bearing and nurturing of her children. Once upon a time she must have possessed the delicate prettiness that characterized her eldest daughter Jeanie, but it had faded long since. She was worn out now, a tired, drab little woman, with no strength left to stand against adversity. The only consolation in her life was her love for her husband. Him she worshipped, not wholly blindly, but with a devotion that never faltered. A kind word from him was capable of exalting her to a state of rapture that was only outmatched by the despair engendered by his displeasure. There was so much of sorrow mingled with her love for her children that they could scarcely have been regarded as a joy. In fact, Avery often thought to herself how much happier she would have been without them.

"Do sit down, Mrs. Denys!" she begged nervously, as Avery remained motionless in the middle of the room. "Stay with me for a little, won't you? I can never bear to be alone when any of the children are being punished. I sometimes think Pat is the worst of all. He is so highly strung, and he loses his head. And Stephen doesn't quite understand him, and he is so terribly severe when they rebel.

And did you know that Ronald and Julian had been smoking again on the way back from school? They look so dreadfully ill, both of them. I know their father will find out."

Mrs. Lorimer's whispered words went into soft weeping. She hid her face in the cushion.

A curious little spasm went through Avery, and for a few mad seconds she wanted to burst into heartless laughter. She conquered the impulse with a desperate effort, though it left her feeling slightly hysterical.

She moved across to the forlorn little woman and stooped over her.

"Don't cry, dear Mrs. Lorimer!" she urged. "It doesn't do any good. Perhaps Ronald and Julian are better by now. Shall we go upstairs and see?"

The principle was a wrong one and she knew it, but for the life of her she could not have resisted the temptation at that moment. She had an unholy desire to get the better of the Reverend Stephen which would not be denied.

Mrs. Lorimer checked her tears. "You're very kind," she murmured shakily.

She dried her eyes and sat up. "Do you think it would be wrong to give them a spoonful of brandy?" she asked wistfully.

But Avery's principles were proof against this at least. "Yes, I do," she said. "But we can manage quite well without it. Let us go, shall we, and see what can be done?"

"I'm afraid I'm very wicked," sighed Mrs. Lorimer. "I'm very thankful to have you with us, dear. I don't know what I should do without you."

Avery's pretty mouth took an unfamiliar curve of grimness for a moment, but she banished it at once. She slipped a sustaining hand through Mrs. Lorimer's arm. "Thank you for saying so, though, you know, I've only been with you a fortnight, and I don't feel that I have done very much to deserve such high praise."

"I don't think time has much to do with friendship," said Mrs. Lorimer, looking at her with genuine affection in her faded blue eyes. "Do you know I became engaged to my husband before I had known him a fortnight?"

But this was a subject upon which Avery found it difficult to express any sympathy, and she gently changed it. "You are looking very tired. Don't you think you could lie down for a little in your bedroom before supper?"

"I must see the poor boys first," protested Mrs. Lorimer.

"Yes, of course. We will go straight up, shall we?"

She led her to the door with the words, and they went out together into the hall. As they emerged, a sudden burst of stormy crying came from the study. Pat was literally howling at the top of his voice.

His mother stopped and wrung her hands. "Oh, what is to be done? He always cries like that. He used to as a baby—the only one of them who did. Mrs. Denys, what shall I do? I don't think I can bear it."

Avery drew her on towards the stairs. "My dear, come away!" she said practically. "You can't do anything. Interference will only make matters worse. Let us go right up to the boys' room! Pat is sure to come up directly."

They went to the boys' room. It was a large attic in which the three elder boys slept. Ronald and Julian, aged fifteen and fourteen respectively, were both lying prostrate on their beds.

Julian uttered a forced laugh at the sight of his mother's face. "My dear Mater, for heaven's sake don't come fussing round here! We've been smoking some filthy cigars—little beastly Brown dared us to—and there's been the devil to pay. I can't get up. My tummy won't let me."

"Oh, Julian, why do you do it?" said Mrs. Lorimer, in great distress. "You know what your father said the last time."

She bent over him. Julian was her favourite of them all. But he turned his face sharply to avoid her kiss.

"Don't, Mater! I don't feel up to it. I can't jaw either. I believe those dashed cigars were poisoned. Hullo, Ronald, are you quieting down yet?"

"Shut up!" growled Ronald.

His brother laughed again sardonically. "Stick to it, my hearty! There's a swishing in store for us. The mater always gives the show away."

"Julian!" It was Avery's voice; she spoke with quick decision. "You've got exactly an hour—you and Ronald—to pull yourselves together. Don't lie here any longer! Get up and go out! Go for a hard walk! No, of course you don't feel like it. But it will do you good. You want to get that horrible stuff out of your lungs. Quick! Go now—while you can!"

"But I can't!" declared Julian.

"Yes, you can—you must! You too, Ronald! Where are your coats? Pop them on and make a dash for it! You'll come back better. Perhaps you will get out of the swishing after all."

Julian turned his head and looked at her by the light of the flaring, unshaded gas-jet. "By Jove!" he said, "You're rather a brick, Mrs. Denys."

"Don't stop to talk!" she commanded. "Just get up and do as I say! Go down the back stairs, mind! I'll let you in again in time to get ready for supper."

Julian turned to his brother. "What do you say to it, Ron?"

"Can't be done," groaned Ronald.

"Oh yes, it can." Sheer determination sounded in Avery's response. "Get up, both of you! If it makes you ill, it can't be helped. You will neither of you get any better lying here. Come, Ronald!" She went to him briskly. "Get up! I'll help you. There! That's the way. Splendid! Now keep it up! Don't let yourself go again! You will feel quite different when you get out into the open air."

By words and actions she urged them, Mrs. Lorimer standing pathetically by, till finally, fired by her energy, the two miscreants actually managed to make their escape without mishap.

She ran downstairs to see them go, returning in time to receive the wailing Pat, who had been sent to bed in a state verging on hysterics. Neither she nor his mother could calm him for some time, and when at length he was somewhat comforted one of the younger boys fell down in an adjacent room and began to cry lustily.

Avery went to the rescue, earnestly entreating Mrs. Lorimer to go down to her room and rest. She was able to soothe the sufferer and leave him to the care of the nurse, and she then followed Mrs. Lorimer, whom she found bathing her eyes and trying not to cry.

So piteous a spectacle was she that Avery found further formality an absolute impossibility. She put her arm round the little woman and begged her not to fret.

"No, I know it's wrong," whispered Mrs. Lorimer, yielding like a child to the kindly support. "But I can't help it

sometimes. You see, I'm not very strong—just now." She hesitated and glanced at Avery with a guilty air. "I—I haven't told him yet," she said in a lower whisper still. "Of course I shall have to soon; but—I'm afraid you will think me very deceitful—I like to choose a favourable time, when the children are not worrying him quite so much. I don't want to—to vex him more than I need."

"My dear!" Avery said compassionately. And she added as she had added to the daughter half an hour before, "Poor little thing!"

Mrs. Lorimer gave a feeble laugh, lifting her face. "You are a sweet girl, Avery. I may call you that? I do hope the work won't be too much for you. You mustn't let me lean on you too hard."

"You shall lean just as hard as you like," Avery said, and, bending, kissed the tired face. "I am here to be a help to you, you know. Yes, do call me Avery! I'm quite alone in the world, and it makes it feel like home. Now you really must lie down till supper. And you are not to worry about anything. I am sure the boys will come back much better. There! Is that comfortable?"

"Quite, dear, thank you. You mustn't think about me any more. Good-bye! Thank you for all your goodness to me!" Mrs. Lorimer clung to her hand for a moment. "I was always prejudiced against mother's helps before," she said ingenuously. "But I find you an immense comfort—an immense comfort. You will try and stay, won't you, if you possibly can?"

"Yes," Avery promised. "I will certainly stay—if it rests with me."

Her lips were very firmly closed as she went out of the room and her grey eyes extremely bright. It had been a strenuous half-hour.

CHAPTER V

LIFE ON A CHAIN

"OH, I say, are you going out?" said Piers. "I was just coming to call on you."

"On me?" Avery looked at him with brows raised in surprised interrogation.

He made her a graceful bow, nearly sweeping the path outside the Vicarage gate with his cap. "Even so, madam. On you! But as I perceive you are not at home to callers, may I be permitted to turn and walk beside you?"

As he suited the action to the words, it seemed superfluous to grant the permission, and Avery did not do so.

"I am only going to run quickly down to the post," she said, with a glance at some letters she carried.

He might have offered to post them for her, but such a course did not apparently occur to him. Instead he said: "I'll race you if you like."

Avery refrained from smiling, conscious of a gay glance flung in her direction.

"I see you prefer to walk circumspectly," said Piers. "Well, I can do that too. How is Mike? Why isn't he with you?"

"Mike is quite well, thank you," said Avery. "And he is kept chained up."

"What an infernal shame!" burst from Piers. "I'd sooner shoot a dog than keep him on a chain."

"So would I!" said Avery impulsively.

The words were out before she could check them. It was a subject upon which she found it impossible to maintain her reticence.

Piers grinned triumphantly and thrust out a boyish hand. "Shake!" he said. "We are in sympathy!"

But Avery only shook her head at him, refusing to be drawn. "People—plenty of nice people—have no idea of the utter cruelty of it," she said. "They think that if a dog has never known liberty, he is incapable of desiring it. They don't know, they don't realize, the bitterness of life on a chain."

"Don't know and don't care!" declared Piers. "They deserve to be chained up themselves. One day on a chain would teach your nice people quite a lot. But no one cultivates feeling in this valley of dry bones. It isn't the thing nowadays. Let a dog whine his heart out on a chain! Who cares? There's no room for sentimental scruples of that sort. Can't you see the Reverend Stephen [illegible] at the bare idea of extending a little of his precious Christian pity to a dog?" He broke off with a laugh that rang defiantly. "Now it's your turn!" he said.

"My turn?" Avery glanced at his dark, handsome face with a touch of curiosity.

He met her eyes with his own as if he would beat them back. "Aren't you generous enough to remind me that but for your timely interference I should have beaten my own dog to death only yesterday? You were almost ready to flog me for it at the time."

"Oh, that!" Avery said, looking away again. "Yes, of course I might remind you of that if I wanted to be personal; but, you see—I don't."

"Why not?" said Piers stubbornly. "You were personal enough yesterday."

The dimple, for which Avery was certainly not responsible, appeared suddenly near her mouth. "I am afraid I lost my temper yesterday," she said.

"How wrong of you!" said Piers. "I hope you confessed to the Reverend Stephen."

She glanced at him again and became grave. "No, I didn't confess to anyone. But I think it's a pity ever to lose one's temper. It involves a waste of power."

"Does it?" said Piers.

"Yes." She nodded with conviction. "We need all the strength we can muster for other things. How is your dog to-day?"

Piers ignored the question. "What other things?" he demanded.

She hesitated.

"Go on!" said Piers imperiously.

Avery complied half-reluctantly. "I meant—mainly—the burdens of life. We can't afford to weaken ourselves by any loss of self-control. The man who keeps his temper is immeasurably stronger than the man who loses it."

Piers was frowning; his dark eyes looked almost black. Suddenly he turned upon her. "Mrs. Denys, I have a strong suspicion than your temper is a sweet one. If so, you're no judge of these things. Why didn't you leather me with my own whip yesterday? You had me at your mercy."

[illegible] smiled. Plainly he was set upon a personal encounter, and she could not avoid it. "Well, frankly, Mr. Evesham," she said, "I was never nearer to striking anyone in my life."

"Then why did you forbear? You weren't afraid to souse me with cold water."

"Oh, no," she said, "I wasn't afraid."

"I believe you were," maintained Piers. "You're afraid to speak your mind to me now, anyway."

She laughed a little. "No, I'm not. I really can't explain myself to you. I think you forget that we are practically strangers."

"You talk as if I had been guilty of familiarity," said Piers.

"No, no! I didn't mean that." Avery coloured suddenly, and the soft glow made her wonderfully fair to see. "You know quite well I didn't mean it," she said.

"It's good of you to say so," said Piers. "But I really didn't know. I thought you had decided that I was a suitable subject for snubbing. I'm not a bit. I'm so accustomed to it that I don't care a——" he paused, with a glance of quizzical daring, and, as she managed to look severe, amended the sentence—"that I am practically indifferent to it. Mrs. Denys, I wish you had struck me yesterday."

"Really?" said Avery.

"Yes, really. I should then have had the pleasure of forgiving you. It's a pleasure I don't often get. You see, I'm usually the one that's in the wrong."

She looked at him then with quick interest; she could not help it. But the dark eyes triumphed over her so shamelessly that she veiled it on the instant.

Piers laughed. "Mrs. Denys, may I ask a directly personal question?"

"I don't know why you should," said Avery.

They were nearing the pillar-box at the end of the Vicarage lane, and she was firmly determined that at that box their ways should separate.

"I know you think I'm bold and bad," said Piers. "Some kind friend has probably told you so. But I'm not. I've been brought up badly, that's all. I think you might bear with me. I'm quite willing to be bullied." There was actual pathos in the declaration.

Again the fleeting dimple hovered near Avery's mouth. "Please don't take my opinion for granted in that way!" she said. "I have hardly had time to form one yet."

"Then I may ask my question?" said Piers.

She turned steady grey eyes upon him. "Yes; you may."

Piers' face was perfectly serious. "Are you really married?" he asked.

The level brows went up a little. "I have been a widow for six years," said Avery very quietly.

He stared at her in surprise unfeigned. "Six years!"

She replied in the same quiet voice: "I lost my husband when I was twenty-two."

"Great heavens above!" ejaculated Piers. "But you're not—not—I say, forgive me, I must say it—you can't be as old as that!"

"I am twenty-nine," said Avery, faintly smiling.

They had reached the letter-box. She dropped in her letters one by one. Piers stood confounded, looking on.

Suddenly he spoke. "And you've been doing this mother's-helping business for six years?"

"Oh, no!" she said.

She turned round from the box and faced him. The red winter sunset glowed softly upon her. Her grey eyes looked straight into it.

"No!" she said again. "I had my little girl to take care of for the first six months. You see, she was born blind, soon after her father's death, and she needed all the care I could give her."

Piers made a sharp movement—a gesture that was almost passionate; but he said nothing.

Avery withdrew her eyes from the sunset, and looked at him. "She died," she said, "and that left me with nothing to do. I have no near relations. So I just had to set to work to find something to occupy me. I went into a children's hospital for training, and spent some years there. Then when that came to an end I took a holiday; but I found I wanted children. So I cast about me, and finally answered Mr. Lorimer's advertisement and came here." She began to smile. "At least I have plenty of children now."

"Oh, I say!" broke in Piers. "What a perfectly horrible life you've had! You don't mean to say you're happy—what?"

Avery laughed. "I'm much too busy to think about it. And now I really must run back. I've promised to take charge of the babies this afternoon. Good-bye!" She held out her hand to him with frank friendliness, as if she divined the sympathy he did not utter.

He gripped it hard for a moment. "Thanks awfully for being so decent as to tell me!" he said, looking back at her with eyes as frank as her own. "I'm going on down to the home farm. Good-bye!"

He raised his cap, and abruptly strode away. And in the moment of his going, Avery found she liked him better than she had liked him throughout the interview, for she knew quite well that he went only in deference to her wish.

She turned to retrace her steps, feeling puzzled. There was something curiously attractive about the young man's personality, something that appealed to her, yet that she felt disposed to resist. That air of the ancient Roman was wonderfully compelling, too compelling for her taste, but then his boyishness counteracted it to a very great degree. There was a hint of sweetness running through his arrogance against which she was not proof. Audacious he might be, but it was a winning species of audacity that probably no woman could condemn. She thought to herself as she returned to her charges that she had never seen a face so faultlessly patrician and yet so vividly alive. And following that thought came another that dwelt longer in her mind. Deprived of its animation, it would not have been a happy face.

Avery wondered why.

CHAPTER VI

THE RACE

"HOORAY! No more horrid sums for a whole month!"

Gracie Lorimer's arithmetic-book soared to the ceiling and came down with a bang, while Gracie herself pivoted, not ungracefully, on her toes till sheer giddiness and exhaustion put an end to her rhapsody. Then she staggered to Avery, who was darning the family stockings by the window, and flung ecstatic arms about her neck.

"Dear Mrs. Denys, aren't you glad it's holidays?" she gasped. "We'll give you such a lovely time!"

"I'm sure you will, dear," said Avery. "But do mind the needle!"

She kissed the brilliant, childish face that was pressed to hers. She and Gracie were close friends. Gracie was eleven, and the prettiest madcap of them all. It was a perpetual marvel to Avery that the child managed to be so happy, for she was continually in trouble. But she seemed to possess a cheery knack of throwing off adversity. She was essentially gay of heart.

"Do put away those stupid old stockings and come out with us!" she begged, still hanging over Avery. "Don't you hate darning? I do. We had to do our own before you came. I was very naughty one day last summer. I went out and played in the garden instead of mending my stockings, and Father found out." Gracie cast up her eyes dramatically. "He sent me in to do them, and went off to one of his old parish parties; and I just sneaked out as soon as his back was turned and went on with the game. But there was no luck that day. He came back to fetch something and caught me. And then—just imagine!" Again Gracie was dramatic, though this time unconsciously. "He sent me to bed and—what do you think? When he came home to tea, he—whipped me!"

Avery threaded her needle with care. She said nothing.

"I think it was rather a shame," went on Gracie unconcernedly. "Because he never whips Jeanie or Olive. But then, he can make them cry without, and he can't make me. I 'spect that's what made him do it, don't you?"

"I don't know, dear," said Avery rather shortly.

Gracie peered round into her face. "Mrs. Denys, you don't like Father, do you?" she said.

"My dear, that's not a nice question to ask," said Avery, with her eyes on her work.

"I don't know why not," said Gracie. "I don't like him myself, and he knows I don't. He'd whip me again if he got the chance, but I'm too jolly careful now. I was pleased that you got Ronnie and Julian off the other day. He never suspected, did he? I thought I should have burst during prayers. It was so funny."

"My dear!" protested Avery.

"Yes, I know," said Gracie. "But you aren't really shocked, dear, kind Mrs. Denys! You know you aren't. I can see your sweet little dimple. No, I can't! Yes, I can! I do love your dimple. It goes in and out like the sun."

Avery leaned back abruptly in her chair. "Oh, foolish one!" she said, and gathered the child to her with a warmth to which the ardent Gracie was swift to respond.

"And you are coming out with us, aren't you? Because it's so lovely and cold. I want to go up on that big hill in Rodding Park, and run and run and run till I just can't run any longer. Ronnie and Julian are coming too. And Jeanie and Olive and Pat. We ought to begin and collect holly for the church decorations. You'll be able to help this year, won't you? Miss Whalley always bosses things. Have you met Miss Whalley yet? She's quite the funniest person in Rodding. She was the daughter of the last Vicar, and she has never forgotten it. So odd of her! As if there were anything in it! I often wish I weren't a parson's daughter. I'd much rather belong to someone who had to go up to town every day. There would be much more fun for everybody then."

Avery was laying her mending together. She supposed she ought to check the child's chatter, but felt too much in sympathy with her to do so. "I really don't know if I ought to come," she said. "But it is certainly too fine an afternoon for you to waste indoors. Where are the boys?"

"Oh, they're messing about somewhere in the garden. You see, they've got to keep out of sight, or Father will set them to work to roll the lawn. He always does that sort of thing. He calls it 'turning our youthful energies to good account.'" Very suddenly and wickedly Gracie mimicked the pastoral tones. "But the boys call it 'nigger-driving,'" she added, "and I think the boys are right. When I'm grown up, I'll never, never, never make my children do horrid things like that. They shall have—oh, such a good time!"

There was unconscious pathos in the declaration. Avery looked at the bright face very tenderly.

"I wonder what you'll do with them when they're naughty, Gracie," she said.

"I shall never whip them," said Gracie decidedly. "I think whipping is a horrid punishment. It makes you hate everybody. I think I shan't punish them at all, Mrs. Denys. I shall just tell them how wrong they've been, and that they are never to do it again. And I'm sure they won't," she added with confidence. "They'll love me too much."

She slipped her arm round Avery's waist as she rose. "Do

you know I would dreadfully like to call you Aunt Avery?" she said. "I said so to Jeanie, and Jeanie wants to, too. Do you mind?"

"Mind!" said Avery. "I shall love it."

"Oh, thank you—awfully!" Gracie kissed her fervently. "I'll run and tell Jeanie. She will be pleased."

She skipped from the room, and Avery went to prepare for the walk. "Poor little souls!" she murmured to herself. "How I wish they were mine!"

They mustered only five when they started—the three girls, Pat, and Avery herself; but ere they had reached the end of the lane the two elder boys leapt the Vicarage wall with a whoop of triumph and joined them. The party became at once uproariously gay. Everyone talked at the same time, even Jeanie becoming animated. Avery rejoiced to see the pretty face flushed and merry. She had begun to feel twinges of anxiety about Jeanie lately. But she was able to banish them at least for to-day, for Jeanie ran and chattered with the rest. In fact, Olive was the only one who showed any disposition to walk sedately. It had to be remembered that Olive was the clever one of the family. She more closely resembled her father than any of the others, and Avery firmly believed her to be the only member of the family that Mr. Lorimer really loved. She was a cold-hearted, sarcastic child, extremely self-contained, giving nothing and receiving nothing in return. It was impossible to become intimate with her. Avery had given up the attempt almost at the outset, realizing that it was not in Olive's nature to be intimate with anyone. They were always exceedingly polite to one another, but beyond that their acquaintance made no progress. Olive lived in a world of books, and the practical side of life scarcely touched her and most certainly never appealed to her sympathy. "She will be her father over again," Mrs. Lorimer would declare, with pathetic pride. "So dignified, so handsome, and so clever!"

And Avery agreed, not without reserve, that she certainly resembled him to a marked degree.

She was by far the most sober member of the party that entered Rodding Park that afternoon. Avery, inspired by the merriment around her, was in a frankly frivolous mood. She was fast friends with the two elder boys, who had voted her a brick on the night that she had intervened to deliver

them from the just retribution for their misdeeds. They had conceived an immense admiration for her which placed her in a highly privileged position.

"If Mrs. Denys says so, it is so," was Ronald's fiat, and she knew that such influence as he possessed with his brothers and sisters was always at her disposal.

She liked Ronald. The boy was a gentleman. Though slow, he was solid; and she suspected that he possessed more depth of character than the more brilliant Julian. Julian was crafty; there was no denying it. She was sure that he would get on in the world. But of Ronald's future she was not so sure. It seemed to her that he might plod on for ever without reaching his goal. He kept near her throughout that riotous scamper through the bare, wind-swept park, making it plain that he regarded himself as her lieutenant, whether she required his services or not. As a matter of fact, she did not require them, but she was glad to have him there, and she keenly appreciated the gentlemanly consideration with which he helped her over every stile.

They reached the high hill of Gracie's desire, and rapidly climbed it. The sun had passed over to the far west and had already begun to dip ere they reached the summit.

"Now we'll all stand in a row and race down," announced Gracie, when they reached the top. "Aunt Avery will start us. We'll run as far as that big oak tree on the edge of the wood. Now line up, everybody!"

"I'm not going to do anything so silly," said Olive decidedly. "Mrs. Denys and I will follow quietly."

"Oh, no!" laughed Avery. "You can do the starting, my dear, and I will race with the others."

Olive looked at her, faintly contemptuous. "Oh, of course, if you prefer it——" she said.

"I do indeed!" Avery assured her. "But I think the two big boys and I ought to be handicapped. Jeanie and Gracie and Pat must go ten paces in front."

"I am bigger than Gracie and Pat," said Jeanie. "I think I ought to go midway."

"Of course," agreed Ronald. "And, Aunt Avery, you must go with her. You can't start level with Julian and me."

Avery laughed at the amendment and fell in with it. They adjusted themselves for the trial of speed, while Olive stationed herself on a molehill to give the signal.

The valley below them was in deep shadow. The last of the sunlight lay upon the hill-top. It shone dazzlingly in Avery's eyes as the race began.

There had been a sprinkling of snow the day before, and the grass was crisp and rough. She felt it crush under her feet with a keen sense of enjoyment. Instinctively she put all her buoyant strength into the run. She left Jeanie behind, overtook and passed the two younger children, and raced like a hare down the slope. Keenly the wind whistled past her, and she rejoiced to feel its clean purity rush into her lungs. She was for the moment absurdly, rapturously happy—a child amongst children.

The sun went out of sight, and the darkness of the valley swallowed her. She sped on fleet-footed, flushed and laughing, moving as if on wings.

She neared the dark line of wood, and saw the stark, outstretched branches of the oak that was her goal. In the same instant she caught sight of a man's figure standing beneath it, apparently waiting for her.

He had evidently just come out of the wood. He carried a gun on his shoulder, but the freedom of his pose was so striking that she likened him on the instant to a Roman gladiator.

She could not stop herself at once, though she checked her speed, and when she finally managed to come to a stand, she was close to him.

He stepped forward to meet her with a royal air of welcome. "How nice of you to come and call on me!" he said.

His dark eyes shone mischievously as they greeted her, and she was too flushed and dishevelled to stand upon ceremony. Pantingly she threw back her gay reply.

"This is the children's happy hunting-ground, not mine. I suppose, if the truth were told, we are trespassing."

He made her his sweeping bow. "There is not a corner of this estate that is not utterly and for ever at your service."

He turned as the two elder boys came racing up, and she saw the half-mocking light go out of his eyes as they glanced up the hill. "Hullo!" he said. "There's one of them come to grief."

Sharply she turned also. Pat and Gracie were having a spirited race down the lower slope of the hill. Olive had

begun to descend from the top with becoming dignity. And midway, poor Jeanie crouched in a forlorn little heap, with her hands tightly covering her face.

"The child's hurt!" exclaimed Avery.

She started to run back, but in a moment Piers sprang past her, crying: "All right. Don't run! Take it easy!"

He himself went like the wind. She watched him with subconscious admiration. He was so superbly lithe and strong.

She saw him reach Jeanie and kneel down beside her. There was no hesitation about him. He was evidently deeply concerned. He slipped a persuasive arm about the child's huddled form.

When Avery reached them, Jeanie's head, in its blue woollen cap, was pillowed against him, and she was telling him sobbingly of her trouble.

"I—I caught my foot. I don't know—how I did it. It twisted right round—and oh, it does hurt! I—I—I can't help—being silly!"

"All right, kiddie, all right!" said Piers. "It was one of those confounded rabbit-holes. There! You'll be better in a minute. Got a handkerchief—what? Oh, never mind! Take mine!"

He pulled it out and dried her eyes as tenderly as if he had been a woman, then raised his head abruptly and spoke to Avery.

"I expect it's a sprain. I'd better get her boot off and see—what?"

"No, we had better take her home first," said Avery with quick decision.

"All right," said Piers at once. "I'll carry her. I daresay she isn't very heavy. I say, little girl, you mustn't cry." He patted her shoulder kindly. "It hurts horribly, I know. These things always do. But you're going to show me how plucky you can be. Women are always braver than men, aren't they, Mrs. Denys?"

Thus admonished, Jeanie lifted her face and made a valiant effort to regain her self-command. But she clasped her two hands very tightly upon Piers' arm, so that he could not move to lift her.

"I'll be brave in a minute," she promised him tremulously. "You won't mind waiting—just a minute?"

"Two, if you like," said Piers.

Avery was stooping over the injured foot. Jeanie was propped sideways, half lying against Piers' knee.

"Don't touch it, please, Aunt Avery!" she whispered.

The other children had drawn round in an interested group.

"It looks like a fracture to me," observed Olive, in her precise voice.

Piers flashed her a withering glance. "Mighty lot you know about it!" he retorted rudely.

Pat sniggered. He was not fond of his second sister. But his mirth was checked by the impulsive Gracie, who pushed him aside with a brief: "Don't be a pig!"

Olive retired into the background with her nose in the air, looking so absurdly like her father that a gleam of humour shot through even Piers' sternness. He suppressed it and turned to the two elder boys.

"Which of you is to be trusted to carry a loaded gun?"

"I am," said Julian.

"No—Ronald," said Avery very firmly.

Julian stuck out his tongue at her, and was instantly pommelled therefor by the zealous Gracie.

"Ronald," said Piers. "Mind how you pick it up, and don't point it at anyone! Carry it on your shoulder! That's the way. Go slow with it! Now you walk in front and take it down to the lodge!"

He issued his orders with the air of a commanding-officer, and having issued them, turned again with renewed gentleness to the child who lay against his arm.

"Now, little girl, shall we make a move? I'm afraid postponing it won't make it any better. I'll carry you awfully carefully."

"Thank you," whispered Jeanie.

He stooped over her. "Put your arm round my neck! That'll be a help. Mrs. Denys, can you steady her foot while I get up?"

Avery bent to do so. He moved with infinite care; but even so the strain upon the foot was inevitable. Jeanie gave a sharp cry, and sank helpless in his arms.

He began to speak encouragingly, but broke off in the middle, feeling the child's head lie limp upon his shoulder.

"Afraid it's serious," he said to Avery. "We will get her down to the lodge and send for a doctor."

"By Jove! She's fainted!" remarked Julian. "It's a jolly bad sprain."

"It's not a sprain at all," said Olive loftily.

And much as she would have liked to disagree, Avery knew that she was right.

CHAPTER VII

A FRIEND IN NEED

MRS. MARSHALL at the lodge was a hard-featured old woman, whose god was cleanliness. Perhaps it was hardly to be expected of her that she should throw open her door to the whole party. Piers, with his limp burden, and Avery she had to admit, but after the latter's entrance she sternly blocked the way.

"There's no room for any more," she declared with finality. "You'd best run along home."

And with that she shut the door upon them and followed her unwelcome visitors into her spotless parlour.

"What's the matter with the young lady?" she enquired sourly.

Avery answered her in her quick, friendly way: "She has had a fall, poor little thing, and hurt her foot—I'm afraid badly. It's so good of you to let us bring her in here. Won't you spread a cloth to keep her boots off your clean chintz?"

The suggestion was what Piers described later as "a lucky hit." It melted old Mrs. Marshall on the instant. She hastened to comply with it, and saw Jeanie laid down upon her sofa with comparative resignation.

"She do look mortal bad, to be sure," she remarked.

"Can't you find some brandy?" said Piers.

"I think she will come to, now," Avery said. "Yes, look! Her eyes are opening."

She was right. Jeanie's eyes opened very wide and fixed themselves enquiringly upon Piers' face. There was something in them, a species of dumb appeal, that went straight to his heart. He moved impulsively, and knelt beside her.

Jeanie's hand came confidingly forth to him. "I did try to be brave," she whispered.

Piers' hand closed instantly and warmly upon hers.

"That's all right, little girl," he said kindly. "Pain pretty bad, eh?"

"Yes," murmured Jeanie.

"Ah, well, don't move!" he said. "We'll get your boot off and then you'll feel better."

"Oh, don't trouble, please!" said Jeanie politely.

She held his hand very tightly, and he divined that the prospect of the boot's removal caused her considerable apprehension.

He looked round to consult Avery on the subject, but found that she had slipped out of the room. He heard her in the porch speaking to the children, and in a few seconds she was back again.

"Don't let us keep you!" she said to Piers. "I can stay with Jeanie now. I have sent the children home, all but Ronald and Julian, who have gone to fetch Doctor Tudor."

Piers looked at Jeanie, and Jeanie looked at Piers. Her hand was still fast locked in his.

"Shall I go?" said Piers.

Jeanie's blue eyes were very wistful. "I would like you to stay," she said shyly, "if you don't mind."

"If Mrs. Denys doesn't mind?" suggested Piers.

To which Avery responded: "Thank you. Please stay!"

She said it for Jeanie's sake, since it was evident that the child was sustaining herself on the man's strength; but the look Piers flashed her made her a little doubtful as to the wisdom of her action. She realized that it might not be easy to keep him at arms' length after this.

Piers turned back to Jeanie. "Very well, I'll stay," he said; "anyhow, till Tudor comes along. Let's see! You're the eldest girl, aren't you? I ought to know you by name, but somehow my memory won't run to it."

He could not, as a matter of fact, remember that he had ever spoken to any of the young Lorimers before, though by sight he was well acquainted with them.

Jeanie, in whose eyes he had ever shone as a knight of romance, murmured courteously that no one ever remembered them all by name.

"Well, I shall remember you, anyhow," said Piers. "Queenie, is it?"

"No—Jeanie."

"I shall call you Queenie," he said. "It sounds more imposing. Now won't you let me just slit off that boot? I can do it without hurting you."

"Slit it!" said Jeanie, shocked.

"We shan't get it off without," said Piers. "What do you think about it, Mrs. Denys?"

"I will unfasten the lace first," Avery said.

This she proceeded to do while Piers occupied Jeanie's attention with a success which a less dominant personality could scarcely have achieved.

But when it came to removing the boot he went to Avery's assistance. It was no easy matter, but they accomplished it between them, Piers ruthlessly cutting the leather away from the injured ankle, which by that time was badly swollen. They propped it on a cushion, and made her as comfortable as circumstances would allow.

"Can't that old woman make you some tea?" Piers said then, beginning to chafe at the prospect of an indefinite period of inaction.

"I think she is boiling her kettle now," Avery answered.

Piers grunted. He fidgeted to the window and back, and then, finding Jeanie's eyes still mutely watching him, he pulled up a chair to her side and took the slender hand again into his own.

Avery turned her attention to coaxing the fire to burn, and presently went out to Mrs. Marshall in her kitchen to offer her services there. She was graciously permitted to cut some bread and butter while the old woman prepared a tray.

"I suppose it was Master Piers' fault," the latter remarked with severity. "He's always up to some mischief or other."

Avery hastened to assure her that upon this occasion Piers was absolutely blameless and had been of the utmost assistance to them.

"I'm very glad to hear it," said Mrs. Marshall. "He's a feckless young gentleman, and I often think as he's like to bring the old master's hairs with sorrow to the grave. Sir Beverley do set such store by him—always did from the day he brought him back from his dead mother in Paris, along with that French valet, who carried him like as if he'd been a parcel of goods. He's been brought up by men from his cradle, miss, and it hasn't done him any good. But there!

Sir Beverley is that set against all womenkind there's no moving him."

Mrs. Marshall was beginning to expand—a mark of high favour which she bestowed only upon the few.

Avery listened with respect, comfortably aware that by this simple means she was creating a good impression. She was anxious to win the old dame to a benevolent frame of mind if possible, since to be thrown upon unwilling hospitality was the last thing she desired.

It was characteristic of her that she achieved her purpose. When she returned to the parlour in Mrs. Marshall's wake, she had completely won her hostess's heart, a fact which Piers remarked on the instant.

"There's magic in you," he said to Avery, as she gave him his cup of tea.

"I prefer to call it common sense," she answered.

She turned her attention at once to Jeanie, coaxing her to drink the tea, though her utmost persuasion could not induce her to eat anything. She was evidently suffering a good deal of pain, but she begged them not to trouble about her. "Please have your tea, Aunt Avery! I shall be quite all right."

"Yes, Aunt Avery must certainly have some tea," said Piers with determination, and he refused to touch his own until she had done so.

It was a relief to all three of them when the doctor's dogcart was heard on the drive. Avery rose at once and went to receive him.

Piers stretched a kindly arm behind the cushion that supported Jeanie's head. "Do you really want me to stay with you, little girl?" he asked.

Jeanie was very white, but she looked at him bravely. "Do you mind?" she said.

His dark eyes smiled encouragement. "No, of course I don't mind, if I can be of any use to you. Tudor will probably want to kick me out, but if you have the smallest desire to keep me, I'll stay."

"You are kind," said Jeanie very earnestly. "I think it will help me to be brave if I may hold your hand. You have such a strong hand."

"It is entirely at your service," said Piers.

He turned in his chair at the doctor's entrance, without

rising. His attitude was decidedly dogged. He looked as if he anticipated a struggle.

Dr. Tudor came in behind Avery. He was a man of forty, curt of speech and short of temper, with eyes that gleamed shrewdly behind gold *pince-nez*. He gave Piers a look that was conspicuously lacking in cordiality.

"Hullo!" he said. "You here!"

"Yes, I'm here," said Piers.

The doctor's eyes passed him and went straight to the white face of the child on the sofa. He advanced and bent over her.

"So you've had an accident, eh?" he said.

"Yes," whispered Jeanie, pressing a little closer to Piers.

"What happened?"

"I think it was a rabbit-hole," said Jeanie not very lucidly.

"Caught your foot and fell, I suppose?" said the doctor. "Was that all? Did you do any walking after it?"

"Oh no!" said Jeanie, with a shudder. "Mr. Evesham carried me."

"I see." He was holding her wrist between his fingers. Very suddenly he looked at Piers again. "I can't have you here," he said.

"Can't you?" said Piers. He threw back his head with an aggressive movement, but said no more.

"Please let him stay!" said Jeanie beseechingly.

The doctor frowned.

In a low voice Avery intervened: "I told him he might—for the child's sake."

Dr. Tudor turned his hawk eyes upon her. "Who are you, may I ask?"

Piers' free hand clenched, and a sudden hot flush rose to his forehead. But Avery made answer before he could speak. "I am the mother's help at the Vicarage. My name is Denys—Mrs. Denys. And Jeanie is in my care. Now, will you look at the injury?"

She smiled a little as she said it, but the decision of her speech was past disputing. Dr. Tudor regarded her piercingly for a moment or two, then without a word turned aside.

The tension went out of Piers' attitude; he held Jeanie comfortingly close.

At the end of a brief examination the doctor spoke: "Yes,

A simple fracture. I can soon put that to rights. You can help me, Mrs. Denys."

He went to work at once, giving occasional curt directions to Avery, while Jeanie clung convulsively to Piers, her face buried in his coat, and fought for self-control.

It was a very plucky fight, for the ordeal was a severe one; and when it was over the poor child broke down completely in spite of all her efforts and wept upon Piers' shoulder. He soothed and consoled her with the utmost kindness. It had been something of an ordeal for him also, and he turned his attention to comforting her with relief.

She soon grew calmer and apologized humbly for her weakness. "I don't think I could have borne it without you," she told him, with tremulous sincerity. "But I'm so dreadfully sorry to have given you this trouble."

"That's all right," Piers assured her. "I'm glad you found me of use."

He dried her tears for the second time that afternoon, and then, with a somewhat obvious effort at civility, addressed the doctor.

"I suppose it will be all right to move her now? Can we take her home in the landaulette?"

Curtly the doctor made answer: "Very well indeed, I should say, if we lift her carefully and keep the foot straight. I'll drive you up to the Abbey if you like. I'm going up to see your grandfather."

"I don't know why you should," said Piers quickly. "There's nothing the matter with him."

Dr. Tudor made no reply. "Are you coming?" he asked.

"No, thanks." There was latent triumph in Piers' response. "If you are going up, you can give the order for the landaulette, and tell my grandfather I am staying to see Miss Lorimer safely home."

Dr. Tudor grunted and turned away, frowning.

"Well, so long!" he said to Jeanie. "I'll look in on my way back, and lend a hand with moving you. But you will be all right now if you do as you're told."

"Thank you," said Jeanie meekly.

He went out with Avery, and the door closed behind them.

Jeanie stole a glance at Piers, who was looking decidedly grim.

"Yes," he said in answer. "I detest him, and he knows it."

Jeanie looked a little startled. "Oh, do you?" she said.

"Don't you?" said Piers.

"I—I really don't know. Isn't it—isn't it wrong to detest anyone?" faltered Jeanie.

"Wrong!" said Piers. He frowned momentarily, then as suddenly he smiled. He bent very abruptly and kissed her on the forehead. "Yes, of course it's wrong," he said, "for the people who keep consciences."

"Oh, but——" Jeanie remonstrated, and then something in his face stopped her. She flushed and murmured in confusion, "Thank you for—for kissing me!"

"Don't mention it!" said Piers, with a laugh.

"I should like to kiss you if I may," said Jeanie. "You have been so very kind."

He bent his face to hers and received the kiss. "You're a nice little girl," he said, and there was an odd note of feeling in the words, for all their lightness, that made Jeanie aware that in some fashion he was moved.

"I don't think he is quite—quite happy, do you?" she said to Avery that night when the worst of her troubles were over and she was safely back at the Vicarage.

And Avery answered thoughtfully, "Perhaps—not quite."

CHAPTER VIII

A TALK BY THE FIRE

THE Reverend Stephen Lorimer was writing his sermon for the last Sunday in Advent. His theme was eternal punishment and one which he considered worthy of his utmost eloquence. There was nothing mythical or allegorical in that subject in the opinion of the Reverend Stephen. He believed in it most firmly, and the belief afforded him the keenest satisfaction. It was a nerve-shaking sermon. Had it been of a secular nature, it might almost have been described as inhuman, so obviously was it designed to render his hearers afraid to go home in the dark. But since it was not secular, it took the form of a fine piece of inspiration which, from Mr. Lorimer's point of view at

least, could scarcely fail to make the most stubborn heart in his congregation tremble. He pictured himself delivering his splendid rhetoric with a grand and noble severity as impressive as the words he had to utter, reading appreciation—possibly unwilling appreciation—and dawning uneasiness on the upturned faces of his listeners.

Mr. Lorimer did not love his flock; his religion did not take that form. And the flock very naturally as a whole had scant affection for Mr. Lorimer. The flock knew, or shrewdly suspected, that his eloquence was mere sound—not always even musical—and as a consequence its power was somewhat thrown away. His command of words was practically limitless, but words could not carry him to the hearts of his congregation, and he had no other means at his disposal. For this of course he blamed the congregation, which certainly had no right to wink and snigger when he passed.

This Advent sermon, however, was a masterpiece, and as Mr. Lorimer lovingly fingered the pages of his manuscript he told himself that it could not fail to make an impression upon the most hardened sinner.

A low knock at the door disturbed these pleasant thoughts and he frowned. There was an unwritten law at the Vicarage that save for the most urgent of reasons he should never be interrupted at this hour.

Softly the door opened. Humbly his wife peeped in.

"Are you very busy, Stephen?"

His frown melted away. Here at least was one whose appreciation was never lacking. "Well, my dear Adelaide, I think I may truthfully say that the stress of my business is fairly over. You may come in."

She crept in, mouse-like, and a distant burst of music wafted in with her, causing her to turn and quickly close the door.

"Have you finished your sermon, dear? Can we have a little talk?" she asked him nervously.

He stretched out a large white hand to her without rising. "Yes. I do not think much remains to be said. We have, as it were, regarded the matter from every point of view. I do not think there will be many consciences unaroused when I have enunciated my final warning."

"You have such a striking delivery," murmured Mrs.

Lorimer, clasping the firm, white hand between both her own.

Mr. Lorimer's eyes vanished in an unctuous smile. "Thou idle flatterer!" he said.

"No, indeed, dear," his wife protested. "I think you are always impressive, especially at the end of your sermons. That pause you make before you turn your face to the altar—it seems to me so effective—so, if one may say it, dramatic."

"To what request is this the prelude?" enquired Mr. Lorimer, emerging from his smile.

She laughed a little nervous laugh. Her thin face was flushed. "Shall we sit by the fire, Stephen, as we used to that first happy winter—do you remember?—after we were married?"

"Dear me!" said Mr. Lorimer. "This sounds like a plunge into sentiment."

Nevertheless he rose with a tolerant twinkle and seated himself in the large easy-chair before the fire. It was the only really comfortable chair in the room. He kept it for his moments of reflection.

Mrs. Lorimer sat down at his feet on the fender-curb, her tiny hand still clinging to his. "This is a real treat," she said, laying her head against his knee with a gesture oddly girlish. "It isn't often, is it, that we have it all to ourselves?"

"What is it you have to say to me?" he enquired.

She drew his hand down gently over her shoulder, and held it against her cheek. There fell a brief silence, then she said with a slight effort, "Your idea of a mother's help has worked wonderfully, Stephen. As you know, I was averse to it at first, but I am so glad you insisted. Dear Avery is a greater comfort to me than I can possibly tell you."

"Avery!" repeated the Reverend Stephen, with brows elevated. "I presume you are talking of Mrs. Denys?"

"Yes, dear. I call her Avery. I feel her to be almost one of ourselves." There was just a hint of apology in Mrs. Lorimer's voice. "She has been—and is—so very kind to me," she said. "I really don't know what the children and I would do without her."

"I am glad to hear she is kind," said Mr. Lorimer, with a touch of acidity.

"My dearest, she is quite our equal in position," murmured Mrs. Lorimer.

"That may be, my dear Adelaide." The acidity developed into a note of displeasure. "In a sense doubtless we are all equal. But in spite of that, extremes of intimacy are often inadvisable. I do not think you are altogether discreet in making a bosom friend of a woman in Mrs. Denys's position. A very good woman, I grant you. But familiarity with her is altogether unsuitable. From my own experience of her I am convinced that she would very soon presume upon it."

He paused. Mrs. Lorimer said nothing. She was sitting motionless with her soft eyes on the fire.

Mr. Lorimer looked down at the brown head at his knee with growing severity. "You will therefore, Adelaide, in deference to my wish—if for no other reason—discontinue this use of Mrs. Denys's Christian name."

Mrs. Lorimer's lips moved, but they said nothing.

"Adelaide!" He spoke with cold surprise.

Instantly her fingers tightened upon his with a grip that was almost passionate. She raised her head, and looked up at him with earnest, pleading eyes. "I am sorry, Stephen—dear Stephen—but I have already given my friendship to—to Mrs. Denys. She has been—she is—like a sister to me. So you see, I can't possibly take it away again. You would not wish it if you knew."

"If I knew!" repeated Mr. Lorimer, in a peculiar tone.

She turned her face from him again, but he leaned slowly forward in his chair and taking her chin between his finger and thumb turned it deliberately back again.

She shrank a little, but she did not resist him. He looked searchingly into her eyes. The lids flickered nervously under his gaze, but he did not relax his scrutiny.

"Well?" he said.

Her lips quivered. She said nothing.

But her silence was enough. He released her abruptly and dropped back in his chair without another word.

She sank down trembling against his knee, and there followed a most painful pause. Through the stillness there crept again the faint strains of distant music. Someone was playing the Soldiers' Chorus out of *Faust* on the old cracked schoolroom piano, which was rising nobly to the occasion.

Mr. Lorimer moved at length and turned his head. "Who is that playing?"

"Piers Evesham," whispered Mrs. Lorimer. She was weeping softly and dared not stir lest he should discover the fact.

There was a deep, vertical line between Mr. Lorimer's brows. "And what may Piers Evesham be doing here?" he enquired.

"He comes often—to see Jeanie," murmured his wife deprecatingly.

He laughed unpleasantly. "A vast honour for Jeanie!"

Two tears fell from Mrs. Lorimer's eyes. She began to feel furtively for her handkerchief.

"And Dr. Lennox Tudor"—he pronounced the name with elaborate care—"he comes—often—for the same reason, I presume?"

"He—he came to see me yesterday," faltered Mrs. Lorimer.

"Indeed!" The word was as water dropped from an icicle.

She dabbed her eyes and bravely turned and faced him. "Stephen dear, I am very sorry. I didn't want to vex you unnecessarily. I hoped against hope——" She broke off, and knelt up before him, clasping his hand tightly against her breast. "Stephen—dearest, you said—when our first-born came—that he was—God's gift."

"Well?" Again that one, uncompromising word. The vertical line deepened between her husband's brows. His eyes looked coldly back at her.

Mrs. Lorimer caught her breath on a little sob. "Will not this little one—be just as much so?" she whispered.

He began to draw his hand away from her. "My dear Adelaide, we will not be foolishly sentimental. What must be, must. I am afraid I must ask you to run away now, as I have yet to put the finishing touches to my sermon. Perhaps you will kindly request young Evesham on my behalf to make a little less noise."

He deliberately put her from him, and prepared to rise. But Mrs. Lorimer suddenly and very unexpectedly rose first. She stood before him, slightly bending, her hands on his broad shoulders.

"Will you kiss me, Stephen?" she said.

He lifted a grim, reluctant face.

She stooped, slipping her arms about his neck. "My own dear husband!" she whispered.

He endured her embrace for a couple of seconds; then, "That will do, Adelaide," he said with decision. "You must not let yourself get emotional. Dear me! It is getting late. I am afraid I really must ask you to leave me."

Her arms fell. She drew back, dispirited. "Forgive me—oh, forgive me!" she murmured miserably.

He turned back to his writing-table, still frowning. "I was not aware that I had anything to forgive," he said. "But if you think so"—he shrugged his shoulders, beginning already to turn the pages of his masterpiece—"my forgiveness is yours. I wonder if you would care to divert your thoughts from what I am sure you will admit to be a purely selfish channel by listening to a portion of this Advent sermon."

"What is it about?" asked Mrs. Lorimer, hesitating.

"My theme," said the Reverend Stephen, "is the awful doom that awaits the unrepentant sinner."

There was a moment's silence, and then Mrs. Lorimer did an extraordinary thing. She turned from him and walked to the door.

"Thank you very much, Stephen," she said, and she spoke with decision, albeit her voice was not wholly steady. "But I don't feel that that kind of diversion would do me much good. I think I shall run up to the nursery and see Baby Phil have his bath."

She was gone; but so noiselessly that Mr. Lorimer, turning in his chair to rebuke her frivolity, found himself addressing the closed door.

He turned back again with a heavy sigh. There seemed to be some disturbing element at work. Time had been when she had deemed it her dearest privilege to sit and listen to his sermons. He could not understand her refusal of an offer that ought to have delighted her. He hoped that her heart was not becoming hardened.

Could he have seen her ascending the stairs at that moment with the tears running down her face, he might have realized that that fear at least was groundless.

CHAPTER IX

THE TICKET OF LEAVE

SEATED at the schoolroom piano, Piers was thoroughly in his element. He had a marvellous gift for making music, and his audience listened spell-bound. His own love for it amounted to a passion, inherited, so it was said, from his Italian grandmother. He threw his whole soul into the instrument under his hands, and played as one inspired.

Jeanie, from her sofa, drank in the music with shining eyes. She had never heard anything to compare with it before, and it stirred her to the depths.

It stirred Avery also, but in a different way. The personality of the player forced itself upon her with a curious insistence, and she had an odd feeling that he did it by deliberate intention. Every chord he struck seemed to speak to her directly, compelling her attention, dominating her will. He was playing to her alone, and though she chose to ignore the fact, she was none the less aware of it. By his music he enthralled her, making her see the things he saw, making her feel the fiery unrest that throbbed in every beat of his heart.

Gracie, standing beside him, watching with fascinated eyes the strong hands that charmed from the old piano such music as probably it had never before uttered, was enthralled also, but only in a superficial sense. She was keenly interested in the play of his fingers, which seemed to her quite wonderful, as indeed it was.

He took no more notice of her admiring gaze than if she had been a fly, pouring out his magic flood of music with eyes fixed straight before him and lips that were sometimes hard and sometimes tender. He might have been a man in a trance.

And then very suddenly the spell was broken. For no apparent reason, he fell headlong from his heights and burst into a merry little jig that set Gracie dancing like an elf.

He became aware of her then, threw her a laugh, quickened to a mad tarantella that nearly whirled her off her feet,

finally ended with a crashing chord and whizzed round on the music-stool in time to catch her as she fell gasping against him.

"What a featherweight you are!" he laughed. "You'll dance the Thames on fire some day. Giddy—what?"

Gracie lay in his arms in a collapsed condition. "You—you made me do it!" she panted.

"To be sure!" said Piers. "I'm a wizard. Didn't you know? I can make anybody do anything." There was a ring of triumph in his voice.

Jeanie drew a deep breath and nodded from her sofa. "It's called hyp—hyp—Aunt Avery, what is the word?"

"Aunt Avery doesn't know," said Piers. "And why Aunt Avery, I wonder? You'll be calling me Uncle Piers next."

Both children laughed. "I have a special name for you," Jeanie said.

But Piers was not attending. He cast a daring glance across the room at Avery who was darning stockings under the lamp.

"Do they call you Aunt because you are so old?" he inquired, as Avery did not respond to it.

She smiled a little. "I expect so," she said.

"Oh no!" said Jeanie politely. "Only because we are children and she is grown up."

Piers, with Gracie still lounging comfortably on his knee, bowed to her. "I thank your Majesty. I appeal to you as queen of this establishment: am I—as a grown-up—entitled to drop the title of Aunt when addressing the gracious lady in question?"

Again he glanced towards Avery, but she did not raise her eyes. She worked on, still with that faint, enigmatical smile about her lips.

Jeanie looked slightly dubious. "I don't think you could ever call her Aunt, could you?" she said.

Piers turned upon the music-stool, and with one of Gracie's fingers began to pick out an impromptu tune that somehow had a saucy ring.

"I like that," said Gracie, enchanted.

He laughed. "Yes, it's pretty, isn't it? It's—Avery without the Aunt."

He began to elaborate the tune, accompanying it with

his left hand, to Gracie's huge delight. "Here we come into a minor key," he said, speaking obviously and exclusively to Gracie: "this is Avery when she is cross and inclined to be down on a fellow. And here we begin to get a little excited and breathless; this is Avery in a tantrum, getting angrier and angrier every moment." He hammered out his impertinent little melody with fevered energy, protest from Gracie notwithstanding. "No, you've never seen her in a tantrum of course. Thank your lucky stars you haven't! It's an awful sight, take my word for it! She calls you a brute and nearly knocks you down with a horse-whip." The music became very descriptive at this point; then gradually returned to the original refrain, somewhat amplified and embellished. "This is Avery in her every-day mood—sweet and kind and reasonable—the Avery we all know and love—with just a hint of what the French call *'diablerie'* to make her—*tout à fait adorable.*"

He cast his eyes up at the ceiling, and then, releasing Gracie's hand, brought his impromptu to a close with a few soft chords.

"Here endeth the Avery Symphony!" he declared, swinging round again on the music-stool. "I could show you another Avery, but she is not on view to everybody. It's quite possible that she has never seen herself yet."

He got up with the words, tweaked Gracie's hair, caressed Jeanie's, and strolled across to the fire beside which Avery sat with her work.

"It's awfully kind of you to tolerate me like this," he said.

"Isn't it?" said Avery, without raising her eyes.

He looked down at her, an odd gleam in his own that came and went like a leaping flame.

"You suffer fools gladly, don't you?" he said, a queer inflection that was half a challenge in his voice.

She frowned very slightly above her stocking. "Not particularly," she said.

"You bear with them, then?" Piers' tone was insistent.

She paused as though considering her reply. "I generally try to avoid them," she said finally.

"You keep aloof—and darn stockings," suggested Piers.

"And listen to your music," said Avery.

"Do you like my music?" He shot the question at her imperiously.

Avery nodded.

"Really? You do really?" There was boyish eagerness about him now. He leaned towards her, his brown face aglow.

She nodded again. "Do you ever—write music?"

"No," said Piers.

"Why not?"

He answered with a curious touch of bitterness. "No one would understand it if I did."

"But what a mistake!" she said.

"Is it? Why?" His voice sounded stubborn.

She looked suddenly straight up at him and spoke with impulsive warmth. "Because it is quite beside the point. It wouldn't matter to anyone but yourself whether people understood it or not. Of course popularity is pleasant. Everyone likes it. But do you suppose the really big people think at all about the world's opinion when they are at work? They just give of their best because nothing less would satisfy them, but they don't do it because they want to be appreciated by the crowd. Genius always gets above the crowd. It's only those who can't rise above their critics who really care what the critics say."

She stopped. Her face was flushed, her eyes kindling; but she lowered them very suddenly and returned to her work. For the fitful gleam in Piers' eyes had leaped in response to a blaze so hot, so ardent, that she could not meet it unflinching.

She was oddly grateful to him when he passed her brief confusion by as though he had not seen it. "So I'm a genius, am I?" he said, and laughed a careless laugh. "Are you listening, Queen of my heart? Aunt Avery says I'm a genius."

He moved to Jeanie's sofa, and sat down on the edge of it. Her hand stole instantly into his.

"Yes, of course," she said, in her soft, tired voice. "That's what I meant when I was trying to remember that other word—the word that begins 'hyp.'"

"Hypnotism," said Avery very quietly.

Piers laughed again. "It's a word you don't understand, my Queen of all good fairies. It's only the naughty fairies—the will-o'-the-wisps and the hobgoblins—that know anything about it. It's a wicked spell concocted by the King

of Evil himself, and it's only under that spell that his prisoners ever see the light. It's the one ticket of leave from the dungeons, and they must either use it or die in the dark."

Jeanie was listening with a puzzled frown, but Gracie's imagination was instantly fired.

"Do go on!" she said eagerly. "I know what a ticket-of-leave is. Nurse's uncle had one. It means you have to go back after a certain time, doesn't it?"

"Exactly," said Piers grimly. "When the ticket expires."

"But I don't see," began Jeanie. Her face was flushed and a little distressed. "How can hypnotism be like—like a ticket-of-leave?"

"I told you you wouldn't understand," said Piers. "You see, you've got to realize what hypnotism is before you can know what it's like. It's really the art of imposing one's will upon someone else's, of making that other person see things as you want them to be seen—not as they really are. It's the power of deception carried to a superlative degree. And when that power is exhausted, the ticket may be said to have expired—and the prisoner returns to the dungeon. Sometimes he takes the other person with him. Sometimes he goes alone."

He stopped abruptly as a hand rapped smartly on the door.

Avery looked up again from her work. "Come in!" she said.

"It's the doctor!" whispered Gracie to Piers. "Bother him!"

Piers laughed with his lower lip between his teeth, and Lennox Tudor opened the door and paused upon the threshold.

Avery rose to receive him, but his look passed her almost instantly and rested frowningly upon Piers.

"Enter the Lord High Executioner!" said Piers flippantly. "Well? Who is the latest victim? And what have you come here for?"

The doctor came in. He shook hands with Avery, and turned at once to Piers.

"I have come to see my patient," he said aggressively.

"Have you?" said Piers. "So have I." He stood up, squaring his broad shoulders. "And I'm coming again—by special invitation." His dark eyes flung a gibe with the words.

"Good-bye, Mr. Evesham!" said Avery somewhat pointedly.

He turned sharply, and took her extended hand with elaborate courtesy.

"Good-bye—Mrs. Denys!" he said.

"I'll come down and see you off," cried Gracie, attaching herself to his free arm.

"Ah! Wait a bit!" said Piers. "I haven't said good-bye to the Queen of the Fairies yet."

He dropped upon one knee by Jeanie's sofa. Her arm slid round his neck.

"When will you come again?" she whispered.

"When do you hold your next court?" he whispered back.

She smiled, her pale face close to his. "I love to see you—always," she said. "Come just any time!"

"Shall I?" said Piers.

He was looking straight into the tired, blue eyes, and his own were soft with a tenderness that must have charmed any child to utter confidence. She lifted her lips to his. "As often as ever you can," she murmured.

He kissed her. "I will. Good-night, my Queen!"

"Good-night," she answered softly, "dear Sir Galahad!"

Avery had a glimpse of Piers' face as he went away, and she wondered momentarily at the look it wore.

CHAPTER X

SPORT

IT was the day before Christmas Eve, and Avery had been shopping.

She and Mrs. Lorimer were preparing a Christmas tree for the children, a secret to which only Jeanie had been admitted. The tree itself was already procured and hidden away in a corner of the fruit cupboard—to which special sanctum Mrs. Lorimer and Avery alone had access. But the numerous gifts and ornaments which they had been manufacturing for weeks were safely stored in a corner of Avery's own room. It was to complete this store that

Avery had been down into Redding that afternoon, and she was returning laden and somewhat wearied.

The red light of a cloudy winter sunset lay behind her. Ahead of her, now veiled, now splendidly revealed, there hung a marvellous, glimmering star. A little weight of sadness was dragging at her heart, but she would not give it place or so much as acknowledge its presence. She hummed a carol as she went, stepping lightly through the muddy fields.

The frost had given place to an unseasonable warmth, and there had been some heavy rain earlier in the day. It was threatening to rain again. In fact, as she mounted her second stile, the first drops of what promised to be a sharp shower began to fall. She cast a hasty glance around for shelter, and spied some twenty yards away against the hedge a hut which had probably been erected for the use of some shepherd. Swiftly she made for it, reaching it just as the shower became a downpour.

There was neither door nor window to the place, but an ancient shutter which had evidently done duty for the former was lodged against the wall immediately inside.

She had to stoop to enter, and but for the pelting rain she might have hesitated to do so; for the darkness within was complete. But once in, she turned her face back to the dying light of the sunset and saw that the rain would not last.

At the same moment she heard a curious sound behind her, a panting, coughing sound as of some creature in distress, and something stirred in the furthest corner. Sharply she turned, and out of the darkness two wild, green eyes glared up at her.

Avery's heart gave a great jerk. Instinctively she drew back. Her first impulse was to turn and flee, but something —something which at the moment she could not define— prompted her to remain. The frantic terror of those eyes appealed to that in her which was greater than her own personal fear.

She paused therefore, and in the pause there came to her ears a swelling tumult that arose from the ridge of an eminence a couple of fields away. Right well Avery knew that sound. In the far-off days of her early girlhood it had quickened her pulses many a time. It was enough even now to set every nerve throbbing with a tense excitement.

She turned her face once more to the open, and as she did so she heard again in the hut behind her that agonized sound, half-cough, half-whine, of an animal exhausted and in the extremity of mortal fear.

It was enough for Avery. She grasped the situation on the instant, and on the instant she acted. She felt as if a helpless and tortured being had cried to her for deliverance, and all that was great in her responded to the cry.

She seized the crazy shutter that was propped against the wall, put forth her strength, and lifted it out into the open. It was no easy matter to set it securely against the low doorway. She wondered afterwards how she did it; at the time she tore her gloves to ribbons with the exertion, but yet was scarcely aware of making any.

When the pack swept across the grass in a single yelling, heaving mass, she was ready. She leaned against the improvised door with arms outstretched, and resolutely faced the swarming, piebald multitude.

In a moment the hounds were upon her. She was waist-deep in them. They leaped almost to her shoulders in their madness, smothering her with mud and slobber. For a second or two the red eyes and gaping jaws made even Avery's brave heart quail. But she stood her ground, ordering them back with breathless insistence. They must have thought her a maniac, she reflected afterwards. At the time she fully expected to be torn in pieces, and was actually surprised when they suddenly parted and swept round the hut, encircling it with deep-mouthed baying.

The huntsman, arriving on the scene, found her, white-faced but still determined, still firmly propping the shutter in place with the weight of her body. He called the hounds to order with hoarse oaths and furious crackings of the whip, and as he did so the rest of the field began to arrive, a laughing, trampling crowd of sportsmen who dropped into staring, astounded silence as they reached the scene.

And then the huntsman addressed Avery with sardonic affability.

"P'raps now, miss, you'd be good enough to step aside and let the 'ounds attend to business."

But Avery, with eyes that blazed in her pale face, made scathing answer:

"You shan't kill the poor brute like a rat in a trap. He

deserves better than that. You had your chance of killing in the open, and you failed. It isn't sport to kill in the dark."

"We'll soon have 'im out," said the huntsman grimly.

She shook her head. Her hands, in the ripped gloves, were clenched and quivering.

The huntsman slashed and swore at one of the hounds to relieve his feelings, and looked for inspiration to the growing crowd of riders.

One of them, the M.F.H., Colonel Rose of Wardenhurst, pushed his horse forward. He raised his hat with extreme courtliness.

"Madam," he said, "while appreciating your courage, allow me to point out that that fox is now the legal property of the Hunt, and you have no right whatever to deprive us of it."

His daughter Ina, a slim girl of twenty, was at his elbow. She jogged it impatiently. "He'll remain our property whether we kill or not, Dad. Let him live to run again!"

"What?" cried a voice in the rear. "Let a woman interfere? Great heavens above, Barchard! Have you gone mad?"

Barchard, the huntsman, glanced round uneasily as an old man on a powerful white horse forced his way to the front. His grey eyes glowered down at Avery as though he would slay her. The trampling hoofs came within a yard of her. But if he thought to make her desert her post by that means, he was mistaken. She stood there, actually waiting to be hustled by the fretting animal, and yielding not an inch.

"Stand aside!" thundered Sir Beverley. "Confound you! Stand aside!"

But Avery never stirred. She faced him, panting but unflinching. The foam of his hunter splashed her, the mud from the stamping hoofs struck upwards on her face; but still she stood to defend the defenceless thing behind her.

She often wondered afterwards what Sir Beverley would have done had he been left to settle the matter in his own way. She was horribly afraid, but she certainly would never have yielded to aught but brute force.

But at this juncture there came a sudden diversion. Another voice made itself heard in furious protest. Another horse was spurred forward; and Piers, white to the lips,

with eyes of awful flame, leaned from his saddle and with his left hand caught Sir Beverley's bridle, dragging his animal back.

What he said Avery did not hear; it was spoken under his breath. But she saw a terrible look flash like an evil spirit into Sir Beverley's face. She saw his right arm go up, and heard his riding-crop descend with a sound like a pistol-shot upon Piers' shoulders.

It was a horrible sight and one which she was never to forget. Both horses began to leap madly, the one Sir Beverley rode finally rearing and being pulled down again by Piers, who hung on to the bridle like grim death, his head bent, his shoulders wholly exposed to those crashing, merciless blows.

They reeled away at length through the crowd, which scattered in dismay to let them pass, but for many seconds it seemed to Avery that the awful struggle went on in the dusk as Piers dragged his grandfather from the spot.

A great weakness had begun to assail her. Her knees were quivering under her. She wondered what the next move would be, and felt utterly powerless to put forth any further effort. And then she heard Ina Rose's clear young voice.

"Barchard, take the hounds back to kennels! I'm sure we've all had enough for one day."

"Hear, hear!" said a man in the crowd.

And Ina laughed. "Thank you, Dick! Come along, Dad! Leave the horrid old fox alone! Don't you think we ought to go and separate Sir Beverley and Piers? What an old pepperpot he is!"

"Piers isn't much better," remarked the man she had called Dick. His proper appellation was Richard Guyes, but his friends never stood on ceremony with him.

The girl laughed again inconsequently. She was spoken of by some as the spoilt beauty of the county. "Oh, Piers is stuffed tight with gunpowder, as everybody knows. He explodes at a touch. Get along, Barchard! What are you waiting for? I told you to take the hounds home."

Barchard looked at the Colonel.

"I suppose you'd better," the latter said. He threw a glance of displeasure at Avery. "It's a most unheard of affair altogether, but I admit there's not much to be said for a kill in cold blood. Yes, take 'em home!"

Barchard made a savage cut at two of the hounds who were scratching and whimpering at a tiny chink in the boarding, and with surly threats collected the pack and moved off.

The rest of the field melted away into the deepening dusk. Ina and Dick Guyes were among the last to go. They moved off side by side.

"It'll be the laugh of the county," the man said, "but, egad, I like her pluck."

And in answer the girl laughed again, a careless, merry laugh. "Yes, I wonder who she is. A friend of Piers' apparently. Did you see what a stiff fury he was in?"

"It was a fairly stiff flogging," remarked Guyes. "Ye gods! I wonder how he stood it."

"Oh, Piers can stand anything," said Ina unconcernedly. "He's as strong as an ox."

The voices dwindled and died in the distance. The dusk deepened. A sense of utter forlornness, utter weariness, came upon Avery. The struggle was over, and she had emerged triumphant; but it did not seem to matter. She could think only of those awful blows raining down upon the defenceless shoulders of the boy who had championed her. And, leaning there in the drizzling wet, she covered her face with her hands and wept.

CHAPTER XI

THE STAR OF HOPE

THERE came the swift drumming of galloping hoofs, the check and pause of a leap, and then close at hand the thud of those same hoofs landing on the near side of the hedge. The rider slithered to the ground, patted the animal's neck, and turned forthwith towards the hut. Avery heard naught of his coming. She was crying like a weak, unnerved woman, draggled and mud-spattered, unspeakably distressed. It was so seldom that she gave way that perhaps the failure of her self-control was the more absolute when it came. She had been tried beyond her strengtn. Body and mind were alike exhausted.

But when strong arms suddenly encircled her and she

found herself drawn close to a man's breast, quick and instinctive came the impulse to resist. She drew back from him with a sharp exclamation:

"It's only me," said Piers. "Surely you don't mind me!"

It was naïvely expressed, so naïvely that she assayed to laugh in the midst of her woe. "Oh, how you startled me!" was all she found to say.

"But surely you knew I was coming back!" he said.

The dogged note was in his voice. It embarrassed her subtly. Seeing his face through the deepening gloom, it seemed to her to be set in stern, unyielding lines.

She collected her scattered forces, and gently put his arms away from her. "It was very kind of you, Mr. Evesham," she said. "But please remember that I'm not Jeanie!"

He made an impulsive movement of impatience. "I never pretended you were," he said gruffly. "But you were crying, weren't you? Why were you crying?"

His tone was almost aggressive. He seemed to be angry, but whether with her, himself, or a third person, Avery could not determine.

She decided that the situation demanded firmness, and proceeded to treat it accordingly.

"I was very foolish to cry," she said. "I have quite recovered now, so please forget it! It was very kind of you to take my part a little while ago—especially as you couldn't have been really in sympathy with me. Thank you very much!"

Again he made that gesture of imperious impatience. "Oh, don't be so beastly formal! I can't stand it. If it had been any other man threatening you, I believe I should have killed him!"

He spoke with concentrated passion, but Avery was resolved not to be tragic. She was striving to get back to wholesome commonplace.

"What a good thing it wasn't!" she said. "I shouldn't have cared to be responsible for that. I had quite enough to answer for as it was. I hope you will make peace with your grandfather as soon as possible."

Piers laughed a savage laugh. "He broke his whip over me. Do you think I'm going to make peace with him for that?"

"Oh, Piers!" she exclaimed in distress.

It was out before she could check it—that involuntary use of his Christian name for which it seemed to her afterwards he had been deliberately lying in wait.

He did not take immediate advantage of her slip, but she knew that he noticed it, registered it, as it were, for future reference.

"No," he said moodily, after a pause. "I don't think the debt is on my side this time. He had the satisfaction of flogging me with the whole Hunt looking on." There was sullen resentment in his tone, and then very suddenly to Avery's amazement he began to laugh. "It was worth it, anyway, so we won't cavil about the price. How much longer are you going to bottle up that unfortunate brute? Don't you think it's time he went home to his wife?"

Avery moved away from the shutter against which she had stood so long. "I couldn't let him be killed," she said. "You won't understand, of course. But I simply couldn't."

"Why shouldn't I understand?" said Piers. "You threw that in my teeth before. I don't know why."

His tone baffled her. She could not tell whether he spoke in jest or earnest. She refrained from answering him, and in the silence that followed he lifted the shutter away from the hut entrance and looked inside. Avery's basket of purchases lay at his feet. He picked it up. "Come along! He's crouched up in the corner, and his eyes look as if he thought all the devils in hell were after him. Odd as it may seem to you, I can understand his feelings—and yours. Let's go, and leave him to escape in peace!"

He took her arm as naturally as though he had a right, and led her away. Her basket was in his other hand, in which he carried his riding-whip also. He whistled over his shoulder to his horse, who followed him like a dog.

The rain was gradually ceasing, but the clouds had wholly closed upon the sunset. Avery did not want to walk in silence, but somehow she could not help it. His hold upon her arm was as light as a feather, but she could not help that either for the moment. She walked as one beneath a spell.

And before them the clouds slowly parted, and again there shone that single, magic star, dazzlingly pure against the darkness.

"Do you see that?" said Piers suddenly.

She assented almost under her breath.

For a moment she was conscious of the tightening of his hand at her elbow. "It's the Star of Hope, Avery," he whispered. "Yours—and mine." He stopped with the words. "Don't say anything!" he said hurriedly. "Pretend you didn't hear, if—if you wish you hadn't! Good-bye!"

He thrust her basket into her hand, and turned from her.

A moment he stood as if to give her the opportunity of detaining him if she so desired, and then as she made no sign he went to his horse, who waited a couple of yards away, mounted, and without word or salute rode away.

Avery drew a deep, deep breath and walked on. There was a curious sensation at her heart—almost a trapped feeling—such as she had never before experienced. Again deeply she drew her breath, as if to rid herself of some oppression. Life was difficult—life was difficult!

But presently, as she walked, the sense of oppression lessened. She even faintly smiled to herself. What an odd, passionate youth he was! It was impossible to be angry with him; better far not to take him seriously at all.

She recalled old Mrs. Marshall's dour remarks concerning him: "Brought up by men from his cradle;" brought up, moreover, by that terrible old Sir Beverley on the one hand and an irresponsible French valet on the other. She caught herself wishing that she had had the upbringing of him, and smiled again. There was a great deal of sweetness in his nature; of that she was sure, and because of it she found she could forgive his waywardness, reflecting that he had probably been mismanaged from his earliest infancy.

At this point she reached the high-road, and heard the wheels of a dog-cart behind her. She recognized the quick, hard trot of the doctor's cob, and paused at the side of the road to let him pass. But the doctor's eyes behind their glasses were keen as a hawk's. He recognized her, the deepening dusk notwithstanding, while he was still some yards from her, and pulled in his horse to a walk.

"Jump up!" he said. "I'm going your way."

He reached down a hand to her, and Avery mounted beside him. "How h[illegible]y for me!" she said.

"Tired, eh?" he questioned.

She laughed a little. "Oh no, not really. But it's nice to get a lift. Were you coming to see Jeanie?"

"Yes," said Tudor briefly.

She glanced at him, caught by something in his tone. "Doctor Tudor," she said, after a moment's hesitation, "are you—altogether—satisfied about her?"

Tudor was looking at his horse's ears; for some reason he was holding the animal in to a walk. "I am quite satisfied with regard to the fracture," he said. "She will soon be on her legs again."

His words were deliberately wary. Avery felt a little tremor of apprehension go through her.

"I'm afraid you don't consider her very strong," she said uneasily.

He did not at once reply. She had a feeling that he was debating within himself as to the advisability of replying at all. And then quite suddenly he turned his head and spoke: "Mrs. Denys, you are accustomed to bearing other people's burdens, so I may as well tell you the truth. I can't say—because I don't know—if there is anything radically wrong with that little girl; but she has no stamina whatever. If she had to contend with anything serious, things would go very badly with her. In any case——" he paused.

"Yes?" said Avery.

Tudor had become wary again. "Perhaps I have said enough," he said.

"I don't know why you should hesitate to speak quite openly," she rejoined steadily. "As you say, I am a bearer of burdens. And I don't think I am easily frightened."

"I am sure you are not," he said. "If I may be allowed to say so, I think you are essentially a woman to be relied on. If I did not think so, I certainly should not have spoken as I have done."

"Then will you tell me what it is that you fear for her?" Avery said.

He was looking straight at her through the gloom, but she could not see his eyes behind their glasses. "Well," he said, somewhat brusquely at length, "to be quite honest, I fear—mind you, I only fear—some trouble, possibly merely some delicacy, of the lungs. Without a careful examination I cannot speak definitely. But I think there is little room for doubt that the tendency is there."

"I see," Avery said. She was silent a moment; then, "You have not considered it advisable to say this to her father?" she said.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Would it make any difference?"

Avery was silent.

He went on with gathering force: "I went to him once, Mrs. Denys—once only—about his wife's health. I told him in plain language that she needed every care, every consideration, that without these she would probably lose all her grip on life and become a confirmed invalid with shattered nerves. I was very explicit. I told him the straight, unvarnished truth. I didn't like my job, but I felt it must be done. And he—good man—laughed in my face, begged me to creak no more, and assured me that he was fully capable of managing all his affairs, including his wife and family, in his own way. He was touring in Switzerland when the last child was born."

"Hound!" said Avery, in a low voice.

Tudor uttered a brief laugh, and abruptly quitted the subject. "That little girl needs very careful watching, Mrs. Denys. She should never be allowed to overtire herself, mentally or physically. And if she should develop any untoward symptom, for heaven's sake don't hesitate to send for me! I shan't blame you for being too careful."

"I understand," Avery said.

He flicked his horse's ears, and the animal broke into a trot.

When Tudor spoke again, it was upon a totally different matter. His voice was slightly aggressive as he said: "That Evesham boy seems to be for ever turning up at the Vicarage now. He's an ill-mannered cub. I wonder you encourage him."

"Do I encourage him?" Avery asked.

He made a movement of irritation. "He would scarcely be such a constant visitor if you didn't."

Avery smiled faintly and not very humorously in the darkness. "It is Jeanie he comes to see," she observed.

"Oh, obviously." Tudor's retort was so ironical as to be almost rude.

She received it in silence, and after a moment he made a half-grudging amendment.

"He never showed any interest in Jeanie before, you know. I don't think she is the sole attraction."

"No?" said Avery.

Her response was perfectly courteous, but so vague that it sounded to Lennox Tudor as if she were thinking of something else. He clenched his hand hard upon the handle of his whip.

"People tolerate him for the sake of his position," he said bitterly. "But to my mind he is insufferable. His father was a scapegrace, as everyone knows. His mother was a circus girl. And his grandmother—an Italian—was divorced by Sir Beverley before they had been married two years."

"Oh!" Avery emerged from her vagueness and turned towards him. "Lady Evesham was Italian, was she? That accounts for his appearance, doesn't it? That air of the old Roman patrician about him; you must have noticed it?"

"He's handsome enough," admitted Tudor.

"Oh, very handsome," said Avery. "I should say that for that type his face was almost faultless. I wondered where he got it from. Sir Beverley is patrician too, but in a different way." She stopped to bow to a tall, gaunt lady at the side of the road. "That is Miss Whalley. Didn't you see her? I expect she has just come from the Vicarage. She was going to discuss the scheme for the Christmas decorations with the Vicar."

"She's good at scheming," growled Tudor.

Avery became silent again. At the Vicarage gates, however, very suddenly and sweetly she spoke: "Dr. Tudor, forgive me—but isn't it rather a pity to let oneself get intolerant? It does spoil life so."

He looked at her. "There's not much in my life that could spoil," he said gloomily.

She laughed a little, but not derisively. "But there's always something, isn't there? Have you no sense of humour?"

He pulled up at the Vicarage gates. "I have a sense of the ridiculous," he said bluntly. "And I detest it in the person of Miss Whalley."

"I believe you detest a good many people," Avery said, as she descended.

He laughed himself at that. "But I am capable of appre-

ciating the few," he said. "Mind the step! And don't trouble to wait for me! I've got to tie this animal up."

He stopped to do so, and Avery opened the gate and walked slowly up the path.

At the porch she paused to await him, and turned her face for a moment to the darkening sky. But the Star of Hope was veiled.

CHAPTER XII

A PAIR OF GLOVES

"PIERS! Where the devil are you, Piers?"

There was loud exasperation in the query as Sir Beverley halted in the doorway of his grandson's bedroom.

There was a moment's pause; then Victor, the valet, came quickly forward.

"But *Monsieur Pierre*, he bathe himself," he explained, with beady eyes running over the gaunt old figure in the entrance.

Sir Beverley growled at him inarticulately and turned away.

A moment later he was beating a rousing tattoo on the bathroom door. "Piers! Let me in! Do you hear? Let me in!"

The vigorous splashing within came to a sudden stop. "That you, sir?" called Piers.

"Of course it's me!" shouted back Sir Beverley, shaking the door with fierce impatience. "Damn it, let me in! I'll force the door if you don't."

"No, don't, sir; don't! I'm coming!"

There came the sound of a splashing leap, and bare feet raced across the bathroom floor. The door was wrenched from Sir Beverley's grasp, and flung open. Piers, quite naked, stood back and bowed him in with elaborate ceremony.

Sir Beverley entered and glared at him.

Piers shut the door and took a flying jump back into the bath. The room was dense with steam.

"You don't mind if I go on with my wash, do you?" he said. "I shall be late for dinner if I don't."

"What in thunder do you want to boil yourself like this for?" demanded Sir Beverley.

MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

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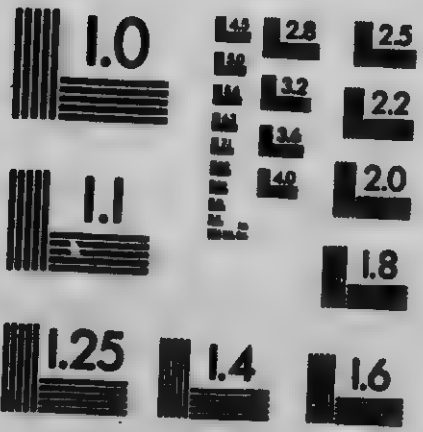

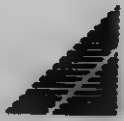

APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1653 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482 - 0300 - Phone
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Piers, seated with his hands clasped round his knees, looked up with the smile of an infant. "It suits my constitution, sir," he said. "I freeze myself in the morning and boil myself at night—always. By that means I am rendered impervious to all atmospheric changes of temperature."

"You're a fool, Piers," said Sir Beverley.

Piers laughed, a gay, indifferent laugh. "That all?" he said lightly.

"No, it isn't all." Sir Beverley's voice had a curious forced ring, almost as if he were stern in spite of himself. "I came to ask—and I mean to know——" He broke off. "What the devil have you done to your shoulders?"

Piers' hands unlocked as if at the touch of a spring. He slipped down backwards into the bath and lay with the water lapping round his black head. His eyes, black also, and very straight and resolute, looked up at Sir Beverley.

"Look here, sir; if there's anything you want to know I'll tell you after dinner. I thought—possibly—you'd come to shake hands, or I shouldn't have been in such a hurry to let you in. As it is——"

"Confound you, Piers!" broke in Sir Beverley. "Don't preach to me! Sit up again! Do you hear! Sit up, and let me look at you!"

But Piers made no movement to comply. "No, sir; thanks all the same. I don't want to be looked at. Do you mind going now? I'm going to splash."

His tone was deliberately jaunty, but it held undoubted determination. He kept his eyes unswervingly on his grandfather's face.

Sir Beverley stood his ground, however, his black brows fiercely drawn. "Get up, Piers!" he ordered, his tone no longer blustering, but curtly peremptory. "Get up, do you hear?" He added, with a gleam of humour, "You may as well give in at once, you young mule. You'll have to in the end."

"Shall I?" said Piers.

And then suddenly his own sense of humour was kindled again, and he uttered his boyish laugh.

"We won't quarrel about it—what?" he said, and stretched a wet hand upwards. "Let's consider the incident closed! There's nothing whatever to be fashed about."

Sir Beverley's thin lips twitched a little. He pulled at

the hand, and slowly Piers yielded. The water dripped from his shoulders. They gleamed in the strong light like a piece of faultless statuary, god-like, superbly strong. But it was upon no splendour of form that Sir Beverley's attention was focused.

He spoke after a moment, an odd note of contrition in his voice. "I didn't mean to mark you like that, boy. It was your own doing, of course. You shouldn't have interfered with me. Still——"

"Oh, rats!" said Piers, beginning to splash. "What's a whacking more or less when you're used to 'em?"

His dark eyes laughed their impudent dismissal to the old man. It was very evident that he desired to put an end to the matter, and after a moment Sir Beverley grunted and withdrew.

He had not asked what he wanted to know; somehow it had not been possible. He had desired to put his question in a whirl of righteous indignation, but in some fashion Piers had disarmed him and it had remained unuttered. The very sight of the straight young figure had quenched the fire of his wrath. Confound the boy! Did he think he could insult him as he had insulted him only that afternoon, and then twist him round his little finger? He would have it out with him presently. He would have the truth and no compromise, if he had to wring it out of him. He would—— Again the vision of those strong young shoulders, with red stripes crossing their gleaming white surface, rose before Sir Beverley. He swore a strangled oath. No, he hadn't meant to punish the boy to that extent, his infernal impudence notwithstanding. It wasn't the first time he had thrashed him, and, egad, it mightn't be the last. But he hadn't meant to administer quite such a punishment as that. It was decent of the young rascal not to sulk after it, though he wasn't altogether sure that he approved of the light fashion with which Piers had elected to treat the whole episode. It looked as if he had not wholly taken to heart the lesson Sir Beverley had intended to convey, and if that were the case—again Sir Beverley swore deep in his soul—he was fully equal to repeating it, ay, and again repeating it, until the youngster came to heel. He never had endured any nonsense from Piers, and, by gad, he never would!

With these reflections he stumped downstairs, and seated

himself on the black oaken settle in the hall to await the boy's advent.

The fire blazed cheerily, flinging ruddy gleams upon the shining suits of armour, roaring up the chimney in a sheet of flame. Sir Beverley sat facing the stairs, the grim lines hardened to implacability about his mouth, his eyes fixed in a stare that had in it something brutal. He was seeing again that slim, straight figure of womanhood standing in his path, with arms outstretched, and white, determined face upraised, barring the way.

"Curse her!" he growled. "Curse 'em all!"

The vision grew before his gaze of hate; and now she was no longer standing between him and a mere defenceless animal. But there, on his own stairs, erect and fearless, she withstood him, while behind her, descending with a laugh on his lips and worship in his eyes, came Piers.

The stone-grey eyes became suffused; for a few whirling moments of bewilderment and fury they saw all things red. Then gradually the mist cleared, and the old man dropped back in a lounging posture with an ugly sound in his throat that was like a snarl. Doubtless that was her game; doubtless—doubtless! He had always known that a day would come when something of the kind would happen. Piers was young, wealthy, handsome—a catch for any woman; but—fiercely he swore it—he should fall a prey to no schemer. When he married—as marry eventually he must—he should make an alliance of which any man might be proud. The Evesham blood should mix with none but the highest. In Piers he would see the father's false step counteracted. He thanked heaven that he had never been able to detect in the boy any trace of the piece of cheap prettiness that had given him birth. He might have been his own son, son of the woman who had been the rapture and the ruin of his life. There were times when Sir Beverley almost wished he had been, albeit in the bitterness of his soul he had never had any love for the child she had borne him.

He had never wanted to love Piers either, but somehow the matter had not rested with him. From the arms of Victor, Piers had always yearned to his grandfather, wailing lustily till he found himself held to the hard old heart that had naught but harshness and intolerance for all the world beside. He had, as it were, taken that unwilling heart by

storm, claiming it as his right before he was out of his cradle. And, later, the attachment between them had grown and thriven, for Piers had never relinquished the ground he had won in babyhood. By sheer arrogance of possession he had held his own till the impetuous ardour of his affection and the utter fearlessness on which it was founded had made of him the cherished idol of the heart which had tried to shut him out. Sir Beverley gloried in the boy, though he still flattered himself that no one suspected the fact, and still believed that his rule was a rule of stern discipline under which Piers might chafe, but against which he would never openly revolt.

He could not remember a single occasion upon which he had not been able to master Piers, possibly after a fierce struggle, but always with absolute completeness in the end. And there was so much of sweetness in the youngster's nature that, unruly though he might be, he never nurtured a grievance. He would fight for his own way to the last of his strength, but when beaten he always yielded with a good grace. To his grandfather alone he could submit without any visible wound to his pride. Who could help glorying in a boy like that?

David, the butler, a man of infinite respectability, came softly into the hall and approached his master.

"Are you ready for dinner, Sir Beverley?"

"No," snapped Sir Beverley. "Can't you see Master Piers isn't here?"

"Very good, sir," murmured David, and retired decorously, fading into the background without the faintest sound, while Cæsar, the Dalmatian, who had entered with him, lay sedately down in well-bred silence at Sir Beverley's feet.

There fell a pause, while Sir Beverley's eyes returned to the wide oak staircase, watching it ceaselessly, with vulture-like intentness. Then after the passage of minutes, there came the sound of feet that literally scampered along the corridor above, and in a moment, with meteor-like suddenness, Piers flashed into view.

He seemed to descend the stairs without touching them, and was greeted at the foot by Cæsar, who leaped to meet him with wide-mouthed delight.

"Hullo, you scamp, hullo!" laughed Piers, responding to the dog's caresses with a careless hand. "Out of the way with you! I'm late."

"As usual," observed Sir Beverley, leaning slowly forward, still with his eyes unblinkingly fixed upon his grandson's merry face. "Come here, boy!"

Piers came to him unabashed.

Sir Beverley got heavily to his feet and took him by the shoulder. "Who is that woman, Piers?" he said, regarding him piercingly.

Piers' forehead was instantly drawn by a quick frown. He stood passive, but there was a suggestion of resistance about him notwithstanding.

"Who do you mean, sir?" he said. "What woman?"

"You know very well who I mean," snarled Sir Beverley. "Come, I'll have none of your damn' nonsense. Never have stood it and never will. Who was that white-faced cat that got in my way this afternoon and helped you to a thrashing? Eh, Piers? Who was she, I say? Who was she?"

Piers made a sharp, involuntary movement of the hands, and as swiftly restrained himself. He looked his grandfather full in the face.

"Ask me after dinner, sir," he said, speaking with something of an effort, "and I'll tell you all I know."

"You'll tell me now!" declared Sir Beverley, shaking the shoulder he gripped with savage impatience.

But Piers put up a quick hand and stopped him. "No, sir, not now. Come and dine first! I've no mind to go dinnerless to bed. Come, sir, don't badger me!" He smiled suddenly and very winningly into the stern grey eyes. "There's all the evening before us, and I shan't shirk."

He drew the bony old hand away from his shoulder, and pulled it through his arm.

"I suppose you think you're irresistible," grumbled Sir Beverley. "I don't know why I put up with you; on my soul, I don't, you impudent young dog!"

Piers laughed. "Let's do one thing at a time, anyway, and I'm ravenous for dinner. So must you be. Come along! Let's trot in and have it!"

He had his way. Sir Beverley went with him, though half against his will. They entered the dining-room still linked together, and a woman's face smiled down upon them from a picture-frame on the wall with a smile half sad, half mocking—such a smile as even at that moment curved Piers' lips, belying the reckless gaiety of his eyes.

They dined in complete amicability. Piers had plenty to say at all times, and he showed himself completely at his ease. He was the only person in the world who ever was so in Sir Beverley's presence. He even now and then succeeded in provoking a sardonic laugh from his grandfather. His own laughter was boyishly spontaneous.

But at the end of the meal, when wine was placed upon the table, he suddenly ceased his careless chatter, and leaned forward with his dark eyes full upon Sir Beverley's face.

"Now, sir, you want to know the name of the girl who wasn't afraid of you this afternoon. I mentioned her to you once before. Her name is Avery Denys. She is a widow; and she calls herself the mother's help at the Vicarage."

He gave his information with absolute steadiness. His voice was wholly free from emotion of any sort, but it rang a trifle stern, and his mouth—that sensitive, clean-cut mouth of his—had the grimness of an iron resolution about it. Sir Beverley looked at him frowningly over his wine.

"The woman who threw a pail of water over you once, eh?" he said, after a moment. "I suppose she has become a very special friend in consequence."

"I doubt if she would call herself so," said Piers.

The old man's mouth took a bitter, downward curve. "You see, you're rather young," he observed.

Piers' eyes fell away from his abruptly. "Yes, I know," he said, in a tone that seemed to hide more than it expressed.

Sir Beverley continued to stare at him, but he did not lift his eyes again. They were fixed steadily upon the ruby light that shone in the wine in front of him.

The silence lengthened and became oppressive. Sir Beverley still watched Piers' intent face. His lips moved soundlessly, while behind his silence the storm of his wrath gathered.

What did the boy mean by treating him like this? Did he think he would endure to be set aside thus deliberately as one whose words had no weight? Did he think—confound him!—did he think that he had reached his dotage?

A sudden oath escaped him; he banged a furious fist upon the table. He would make himself heard at least.

In the same instant quite unexpectedly Piers leaped to his feet with uplifted hand. "What's that?"

"What do you mean?" thundered Sir Beverley.

Piers' hand descended, gripping his arm. "That, sir, that! Don't you hear?"

Voice and gesture compelled. Sir Beverley stopped dead, arrested in full career by his grandson's insistence, and listened with pent breath, as Piers was listening.

For a moment or two he heard nothing, then, close outside the window, there arose the sound of children's voices. They were singing a hymn, but not in the customary untuneful yell of the village school. The voices were clear and sweet and true, and the words came distinct and pure to the two men standing at the table.

"He comes the prisoners to release
In Satan's bondage held,
The gates of brass before Him burst,
The iron fetters yield."

Piers' hand tightened all unconsciously upon Sir Beverley's arm. His face was very white. In his eyes there shone a curious hunger—such a look as might have gleamed in the eyes of the prisoners behind the gates.

Again came the words, triumphantly repeated:

"The gates of brass before Him burst,
The iron fetters yield."

And an odd sound that was almost a sob broke from Piers.

Sir Beverley looked at him sharply; but in the same moment he drew back, relinquishing his hold, and stepped lightly across the room to the window.

There was a decided pause before the next verse. Piers stood with his face to the blind, making no movement. At last, tentatively, like the song of a very shy angel, a single boy's voice took up the melody.

"He comes, the broken heart to bind,
The bleeding soul to cure,
And with the treasures of His grace
To bless the humble poor."

Sir Beverley sat down again at the table. Half mechanically his eyes turned to the pictured face on the wall, the face that smiled so enigmatically. Not once in a year did his eyes turn that way. To-night he regarded it with half-ironical interest. He had no pity to spare for broken hearts. He did not believe in them. No man could have endured more than he had had to endure. He had been dragged through hell itself. But it had hardened, not broken, his

heart. Save in one respect, he knew that he could never be made to suffer any more. Save for that charred remnant, there was nothing left for the flame to consume.

And so through all the bitter years he had borne that smiling face upon his wall, cynically indifferent to the beauty which had been the rapture and the agony of his life—a man released from the place of his torment because his capacity for suffering was almost gone.

Again there were two children's voices singing, and that of the shy angel gathered confidence. With a species of scoffing humour Sir Beverley's stony eyes travelled to the window. They rested upon his boy standing there with bent head—a mute, waiting figure with a curious touch of pathos in its pose. Sir Beverley's sudden frown drew his forehead. What ailed the youngster? Why did he stand as if the whole world were resting on his shoulders?

He made an impatient movement. "For heaven's sake," he said testily, "tell those squalling children to go!"

Piers did not stir. "In a moment, sir!" he said.

And so, clear through the night air, the last verse came unhindered to an end.

"Our glad hosannas, Prince of peace,
Thy welcome shall proclaim;
And Heaven's eternal arches ring
With Thy beloved Name.
And Heaven's eternal arches ring
With Thy beloved Name."

Piers threw up his head with a sudden, spasmodic movement as of a drowning man. And then without pause he snatched up the blind and flung the window wide.

"Hi, you kiddies! Where are you? Don't run away! Gracie, is that you?"

There was a brief silence, then chirpily came the answer: "Pat did the solo; but he's gone. He would have gone sooner—when we saw your shadow on the blind—only I held him so that he couldn't."

Piers broke into a laugh. "Well, come in now you are here! You're not afraid anyhow—what?"

"Oh no!" laughed Gracie. "I'm not a bit afraid. But I'm supposed to be in bed; and if Father finds out I'm not——" She paused with her customary sense of the dramatic.

"Well?" laughed Piers. "What'll happen then?"

"I shall cop it," said Gracie elegantly.

Nevertheless she came to him, and stood on the grass outside the window. The lamplight from within shone on her upturned face with its saucy, confiding smile. Her head was uncovered and gleamed golden in the radiance. She was wearing a very ancient fur cloak belonging to her mother, and she glowed like a rose in the sombre drapery.

Piers stooped to her with hands invitingly outstretched. "Come along, Pixie! We shan't eat you, and I'll take you home on my shoulder afterwards and see you don't get copped."

She uttered a delighted little laugh, and went upwards into his hold like a scrap of floating thistledown.

He lifted her high in his arms, crossed the room with her, and set her down before the old man who still sat at the table, sardonically watching. "Miss Gracie Lorimer!" he said.

"Hullo, child!" growled Sir Beverley.

Gracie looked at him with sparkling, adventurous eyes. As she had told Piers, she was not a bit afraid. After the briefest pause she held out her hand with charming *insouciance*.

"How do you do?" she said.

Sir Beverley slowly took the hand, and pulled her towards him, gazing at her from under his black brows with a piercing scrutiny that would have terrified a more timid child.

Timidity, however, was not one of Gracie's weaknesses. She gave him a friendly smile, and waited without the smallest sign of uneasiness for him to speak.

"What have you come here for?" he demanded gruffly at length.

"I'll tell you," said Gracie readily. She went close to him, confidingly close, looking straight into the formidable grey eyes. "You see, it was my idea. Pat didn't want to come, but I made him."

"Forward young minx!" commented Sir Beverley.

Gracie laughed at the compliment.

Piers, smoking his cigarette behind her, stood ready to take her part, but quite obviously she was fully equal to the occasion.

"Yes, I know," she agreed, with disarming amiability.

"But it wouldn't have mattered a bit if you hadn't found out who it was. You won't tell anyone, will you?"

"Why not?" demanded Sir Beverley.

Gracie pulled down her red lips, and cast up her dancing eyes. "There'd be such a scandal," she said.

Piers broke into an involuntary laugh, and Sir Beverley's thin lips twitched in a reluctant smile.

"You're a saucy little baggage!" he observed. "Well, get on! Let's hear what you've come for! Cadging money, I'll be bound."

Gracie nodded in eager confirmation of this suggestion. "That's just it!" she said. "And that's where the scandal would come in if you told. You see, poor children can go round squalling carols to their hearts' content for pennies, but children like us, who want pennies just as much, haven't any way of getting them. We mayn't carry hand-bags, or open carriage doors, or turn cart-wheels, or—or do anything to earn a living. It's hard luck, you know."

"Beastly shame!" said Piers.

Sir Beverley scowled at him. "You needn't stick your oar in. Go and shut the window, do you hear? Now, child, let's have the truth, so far as any female is capable of speaking it! You've come here for pennies, you say. Don't you know that's a form of begging? And begging is breaking the law."

"I often do that," said Gracie, quite undismayed. "So would you, if you were me. I expect you did, too, when you were young."

"I!" Sir Beverley uttered a harsh laugh, and released the child's hand. "So you break the law, do you?" he said. "How often?"

Gracie's laugh followed his like a silvery echo. "I shan't tell you, 'cos you're a magistrate. But we weren't really begging, Piers and I. At least, it wasn't for ourselves."

"Oh, of course not!" said Sir Beverley.

She looked at him with her clear eyes, unconscious of irony. "No. We wanted to buy a pair of gloves for someone for Christmas. And nice gloves cost such a lot, don't they? And we hadn't got more than tenpence-halfpenny among us. So I said I'd think of a plan to get more. And—that was the plan," ended Gracie, with her sweetest smile.

"I see," said Sir Beverley, with his eyes still fixed immovably upon her. "And what made you come here?"

"Oh, we came here just because of Piers," said Gracie, without hesitation. "You see, he's a great friend of ours."

"Is he?" said Sir Beverley. "And so you think you'll get what you can out of him, eh?"

"Sir!" said Piers sharply.

"Be quiet, Piers!" ordered his grandfather testily. "Who spoke to you? Well, madam, continue! How much do you consider him good for?"

Piers pulled a coin impetuously from his pocket and slapped it down on the table in front of Gracie. "There you are, Pixie," he said. "I'm good for that."

Gracie stared at the coin with widening eyes, not offering to touch it.

"Oh, Piers!" she said, with a long, indrawn breath. "It's a whole sovereign! Oh no!"

He laughed a reckless laugh, while over her head his eyes challenged his grandfather's. "That's all right, Piccaninny," he said lightly. "Put it in your pocket! And I'll come round with the car to-morrow and run you into Wardenhurst to buy those gloves."

But Gracie shook her head. "Gloves don't cost all that," she said practically. "And, besides, you won't have any left for yourself. Fancy giving away a whole sovereign at a time!" She addressed Sir Beverley. "It seems almost a tempting of Providence, doesn't it!"

"The deed of a fool!" said Sir Beverley.

But Piers, with a sudden hardening of the jaw, stooped over Gracie. "Take it!" he said. "I wish it."

She looked up at him. "No, Piers; I mustn't really. It's ever so nice of you." She rubbed her golden head against his shoulder caressingly. "Please don't be cross! I do thank you—awfully. But I don't want it. Really I don't."

"Rot!" said Piers. "Do as I tell you! Take it!"

Gracie turned to Sir Beverley. "I can't, can I? Tell him I can't!"

But Piers was not to be thwarted. With a sudden dive he seized the coin, and without ceremony swept Gracie's hair from her shoulders and dropped it down the back of her neck.

"There!" he said, slipping his hands over her arms and holding her while she squealed and writhed. "It's quite

beyond reach. You can't in decency return it now. It's no good wriggling. You won't get it up again unless you stand on your head."

"You're horrid—horrid!" protested Gracie; but she reached back and kissed him notwithstanding. "Thank you ever so much. I hope I shan't lose it. But I don't know what I shall do with it all. It's quite dreadful to think of. Please don't be cross with him!" she said to Sir Beverley. "It's—awfully—kind."

Sir Beverley smiled sardonically. "And whom are the gloves for? Some other kind youth?"

"Oh no!" she laughed. "Only Aunt Avery. She tore hers all to bits this afternoon. I expect it was over a dog-fight or something, but she wouldn't tell us what. They were nice gloves, too. She isn't a bit rich, but she always wears nice gloves."

"Being a woman!" growled Sir Beverley.

"Don't you like women?" asked Gracie sympathetically. "I like men best, too, as a rule. But Aunt Avery is so very sweet. No one could help loving her, could they, Piers?"

"Have an orange!" said Piers, pulling the dish towards him.

"Oh, thank you, I mustn't stop." Gracie turned to Sir Beverley and lifted her bright face. "Good-bye! Thank you for being so kind."

There was no irony in her thanks, and even he could scarcely refuse the friendly offer of her lips. He stooped and grimly received her farewell salute on his cheek.

Piers loaded her with as many oranges as she could carry, and they finally departed through the great hall, which Gracie surveyed with eyes of reverent admiration.

"It's as big as a church," she said, in an awed whisper.

Sir Beverley followed them to the front door, and saw them out into the night. Gracie waved an ardent farewell from her perch on Piers' shoulder, and he heard the merry, childish laugh more than once after they had passed from sight.

The night air was chilly, and he turned inwards at length with an inarticulate growl, and shut the door.

Heavily he tramped across to the old carved settle before the fire, and dropped down upon it, his whole bearing expressive of utter weariness.

David came in with stealthy footfall and softly replenished the fire.

"Shall I bring the coffee, Sir Beverley?" he asked then.

"No," said Sir Beverley. "I'll ring."

And David effaced himself without sound.

Half an hour passed, and Sir Beverley still sat there motionless as a statue, with thin lips drawn in a single bitter line, and eyes that gazed aloofly at the fire. The silence was intense. The hall seemed desolate as a vault. Over in a corner a grandfather clock ticked the seconds away—slowly, monotonously, as though very weary of its task.

Suddenly in the distance there came a faint sound, the opening of a door; and a breath of night air, pure and cold, blew in across the stillness. In a moment there followed a light, elastic step, and Piers came into view at the other end of the hall. He moved swiftly, as though he trod air. His head was thrown back, his face rapt and intent, as though he saw a vision. He did not see the lonely figure sitting there before the hearth, but turned aside ere he neared it, and entered an unlighted room, shutting himself gently in.

Again the silence descended, but only for a few seconds. Then softly it was dispelled, as through it there stole the tender, passion-sweet harmonies of a Chopin nocturne.

At the first note Sir Beverley started, almost winced as at the sudden piercing of a nerve. Then as the music continued, he leaned rigidly back again and became as still as before.

Very softly the music thrilled through the silence. It might have come from somewhere very far away. There was something almost unearthly about it, a depth and a mystery that seemed to spread as it were invisible wings, filling the place with dim echoes of the Divine.

It died away at last into a silence like the hush of prayer. And then the still figure of the old man before the fire became suddenly vitalized. He sat up abruptly and seized with impatience a small hand-bell from the table beside him.

David made his discreet appearance with the coffee almost at the first tinkle.

"Coffee!" his master flung at him. "And fetch Master Piers!"

David set down the tray at his master's elbow, and turned to obey the second behest. But the door of the drawing

room opened ere he reached it, and Piers came out. His dark eyes were shining. He whistled softly as he came.

David stood respectfully on one side, and Piers passed him like a man in a dream. He came to his grandfather, and threw himself on to the settle by his side in silence.

"Well?" said Sir Beverley. "You took that chattering monkey back, I suppose?"

Piers started and seemed to awake. "Oh, yes, I got her safely home. We had to dodge the Reverend Stephen. But it was all right. She and the boy got in without being caught."

He stirred his coffee thoughtfully, and fell silent again.

"You'd better go to bed," said Sir Beverley abruptly.

Piers looked up, meeting the hard, grey eyes with the memory of his dream still lingering in his own.

Slowly the dream melted. He began to smile. "I think I'd better," he said. "I'm infernally sleepy, and it's getting late." He drank off his coffee and rose. "You must be pretty tired yourself, sir," he remarked. "Time you trotted to bed too."

He moved round to the back of the settle and paused, looking down at the thick white hair with a curious expression of hesitancy in his eyes.

"Oh, go on! Go on!" said Sir Beverley irritably. "What are you waiting for?"

Piers stooped impulsively in response, his hand on the old man's shoulder, and kissed him on the forehead.

"Good night, sir!" he said softly.

The action was purely boyish. It pleaded for tolerance. Sir Beverley jerked his head impatiently, but he did not repulse him.

"There! Be off with you!" he said. "Go to bed and behave yourself! Good night, you scamp! Good night!"

And Piers went from him light-footed, a smile upon his lips. He knew that his tacit overture for peace had been accepted for the time at least.

CHAPTER XIII

THE VISION

IT was growing very dark in the little church, almost too dark to see the carving of the choir-stalls, and Avery gave a short sigh of weariness.

She had so nearly finished her task that she had sent the children in to prepare for tea, declaring that she would follow them in five minutes, and then just at the last a whole mass of ivy and holly upon which the boys had been at work had slipped and strewn the chancel floor. She was the only one left in the church, and it behoved her to remove the litter. It had been a hard day, and she was frankly tired of the very sight and smell of the evergreens.

There was no help for it, however. The chancel must be made tidy before she could go, and she went to the cupboard under the belfry for the dustpan and brush which the sexton's wife kept there. She found a candle also, and thus armed, she returned to the scene of her labours at the other end of the dim little church. She tried to put her customary energy into the task, but it would not rise to the occasion, and after a few strenuous seconds she paused to rest.

It was very still and peaceful, and she was glad of the solitude. All day long she had felt the need of it, and all day long it had been denied her. She had been decorating under Miss Whalley's superintendence, and the task had been no light one. Save for the fact that she had gone in Mrs. Lorimer's stead, she had scarcely undertaken it. For Miss Whalley was as exacting as though the church were her own private property. She deferred to the Vicar alone, and he was more than willing to leave the matter in her hands. "My capable assistant" was his pet name for this formidable member of his flock, and very conscientiously did Miss Whalley maintain her calling. She would have preferred to direct Mrs. Lorimer rather than the mother's help, but since the latter had firmly determined to take the former's place, she had accepted her with condescension and allotted to her all the hardest work.

Avery had laboured uncomplainingly in her quiet,

methodical fashion, but now that the stress was over and Miss Whalley safely installed in the Vicarage drawing-room for tea, she found it impossible not to relax somewhat, and to make the most of those few exquisite moments of sanctuary.

She was very far from expecting any invasion of her solitude, and when, after a moment or two, she went on with her sweeping she had no suspicion of another presence in the dark building. She had set herself resolutely to finish her task, and so energetic was she that she heard no sound of feet along the aisle behind her.

Some unaccountable impulse induced her to pause at length and still kneeling, brush in hand, to throw a backward glance along the nave. Then it was that she saw a man's figure standing on the chancel steps, and so unexpected was the apparition that her weary nerves leaped with a violence out of all proportion to the event, and she sprang to her feet with a startled cry that echoed weirdly through the empty place. Then with a rush of self-ridicule she recognized Piers Evesham. "Oh, it is you!" she said. "How stupid of me!"

He came straight to her with an air of determination that would brook no opposition and took the brush out of her hand. "That's not your job," he said. "You go and sit down!"

She stared at him in silence, trying to still the wild agitation that his unlooked-for coming had raised in her. He was wearing a heavy motor-coat, but he divested himself of this, and without further parley bent himself to the task of which he had deprived her.

Avery sat down somewhat limply on the pulpit stairs and watched him. He was very thorough and far brisker than she could have been. In a very few minutes the litter was all collected, and Piers turned round and looked back at her across the dim chancel.

"Feeling better?" he said.

She did not answer him. "What made you come in like that?" she asked.

He replied to the question with absolute simplicity. "I've just brought Gracie home again. She asked me to tea in the schoolroom, but you weren't there, and they said I should find you here, so I came to fetch you."

He moved slowly across and stood before her, looking

down into her tired eyes with an odd species of relentlessness in his own.

"It's an infernal shame that you should work so hard!" he said, with sudden resentment. "You're looking fagged to death."

Avery smiled a little. "I like hard work," she said.

"Not such as this!" said Piers. "It isn't fit for you. Why can't the lazy hound do it himself?"

Her smile passed. "Hush, Piers!" she said. "Not here!"

He glanced towards the altar, and she thought a shade of reverence came into his face for a moment. But he turned to her again immediately with his flashing, boyish smile.

"Well, it isn't good for you to overwork, you know, Avery. I hate to think of it. And you have no one to take care of you and see you don't."

Avery got up slowly. Her own face was severe in the candlelight, but before she could speak he went lightly on: "Would you like me to play you something before we go? Or are you too tired to blow? It's rather a shame to suggest it. But it's such a grand opportunity."

Avery turned at once to the organ with a feeling of relief. As usual she found it very hard to rebuke him as he deserved.

"Yes, I will blow for you," she said. "But it must be something short, for we ought to be going."

She sat down and began to blow.

Piers took his place at once at the organ. It was characteristic of him that he never paused for inspiration. His fingers moved over the keys as it were by instinct, and in a few moments Avery forgot that she was tired and dispirited with the bearing of many burdens, forgot all the problems and difficulties of life, forgot even her charges at the Vicarage and the waiting schoolroom tea, and sat wrapt as it were in a golden mist of delight, watching the slow spreading of a dawn such as she had never seen even in her dreams. What he played she knew not, and yet the music was not wholly unfamiliar to her. It waked within her soul harmonies that vibrated in throbbing response. He spoke to her in a language that she knew. And as the magic moments passed, the wonderful dawn so grew and deepened that it seemed to her that all pain, all sorrow, had fallen utterly away, and she stood on the threshold of a new world.

Wider and wider spread the glory. There came to her

an overwhelming sense of greatness about to be revealed. She became strung to a pitch of expectancy that was almost anguish, while the music swelled and swelled like the distant coming of a vast procession as yet unseen. She stood as it were on a mountain-top before the closed gates of Heaven, waiting for the moment of revelation.

It came. Just when she felt that she could bear no more, just when the wild beating of her heart seemed as if it would choke her, the music changed, became suddenly all-conquering, a pean of triumph, and the gates swung back before her eager eyes.

In spirit she entered the Holy Place, and the same hand that had admitted her lifted for her the last great Veil. For one moment of unutterable rapture, such as no poor, palpitating, mortal body could endure for long, the vision was her own. She saw Heaven opened.

And then the Veil descended, and the Gates closed. She came down from the mountain-top, leaving the golden dawn very far behind her. She opened her eyes in darkness and silence.

Someone was bending over her. She felt warm hands about her own. She heard a voice, sudden and imploring, close to her.

"Avery! Avery darling! For God's sake, dear, speak to me! What is it? Are you ill?"

"Ill!" she said, bewildered.

His hands gripped hers impetuously. "You gave me such a fright," he said. "I thought you'd fainted. Did you faint?"

"Of course not!" she said slowly. "I never faint. Why did you stop playing?"

"I didn't," said Piers. "At least, you stopped first."

"Oh, did I forget to blow?" she said. "I'm sorry."

She knew that she ought not to suffer that close clasp of his, but somehow for the moment she was powerless to resist it. She sat quite still, gazing out before her with a curious sense of powerlessness.

"You're tired out," said Piers softly. "It was a shame to keep you here. I'm awfully sorry, dear."

She stirred at that, beginning to seek for freedom. "Don't, Piers!" she said. "It—it isn't right of you. It isn't fair."

He knelt swiftly down before her. His voice came quick and passionate in answer. "It can't be wrong to love you," he said. "And you will never be any the worse for my love. Let me love you, Avery! Let me love you!"

The words rushed out tempestuously. His forehead was bowed upon her hands. He became silent, and through the silence she heard his breathing, hard and difficult—the breathing of a man who faces stupendous odds.

With an effort she summoned her strength. Yet she could not speak harshly to him, for her heart went out in pity. "No, you mustn't, Piers," she said. "You mustn't indeed. I am years older than you are, and it is utterly unsuitable. You must forget it. You must indeed. There! Let us be friends! I like you well enough for that."

He uttered a laugh that sounded as though it covered a groan. "Yes, you're awfully good to me," he said. "But you're not—in one sense—anything approaching my age, and pray Heaven you never will be!"

He raised his head and looked at her. "And you're not angry with me?" he said half wistfully.

No, she was not angry. She could not even pretend to be. "But please be sensible!" she begged. "I know it was partly my fault. If I hadn't been so tired, it wouldn't have happened."

He got to his feet, still holding her hands. "No; you're not to blame yourself," he said. "What has happened was bound to happen, right from the very beginning. But I'm sorry if it has upset you. There is no reason why it should that I can see. You are better now?"

He helped her gently to rise. They stood face to face in the dim candlelight, and his eyes looked into hers with such friendly concern that again she had it not in her heart to be other than kind.

"I am quite well," she assured him. "Please forget my foolishness! Tell me what it was you played just now!"

"That last thing?" he said. "Surely you know that! It was Handel's Largo."

She started. "Of course! I remember now! But—I've never heard it played like that before."

A very strange smile crossed his face. "No one but you would have understood," he said. "I wanted you to hear it—like that."

She withdrew her hands from his. Something in his words sent a curious feeling that was almost dread through her heart.

"I don't—quite—know what you mean," she said.

"Don't you?" said Piers, and in his voice there rang a note of recklessness. "It's a difficult thing to put into words, isn't it? I just wanted you to see the Open Heaven as I have seen it—and as I shall never see it again."

"Piers!" she said.

He answered her almost fiercely. "No, you won't understand. Of course you can't understand. You will never stand hammering at the bars, breaking your heart in the dark. Wasn't that the sort of picture our kindly parson drew for us on Sunday? It's a pretty theme—the tortures of the damned!"

"My dear Piers!"—Avery spoke quickly and vehemently—"surely you have too much sense to take such a discourse as that seriously! I longed to tell the children not to listen. It is wicked—wicked—to try to spread spiritual terror in people's hearts, and to call it the teaching of religion. It is no more like religion than a penny dreadful is like life. It is a cruel and fantastic distortion of the truth."

She paused. Piers was listening to her with that odd hunger in his eyes that had looked out of them the night before.

"You don't believe in hell, then?" he said quietly, after a moment.

"As a place of future torment—no!" she said. "The only real hell is here on earth—here in our hearts when we fall away from God. Hell is the state of sin and all that goes with it—the fiery hell of the spirit. It is here and now. How could it be otherwise? Can you imagine a God of Love devising hideous tortures hereafter, for the punishment of the pigmies who had offended Him? Tortures that were never to do them any good, but just to keep them in misery for ever and ever? It is unthinkable—it's almost ludicrous. What is the good of suffering except to purify? That we can understand and thank God for. But the other—oh, the other is sheer imagery, more mythical than Jonah and the whale. It just doesn't go." Again she paused, then very frankly held out her hand to him. "But I like your picture of the Open Heaven, Piers," she said. "Show it

me again some day—when I'm not so tired and stupid as I am to-day."

He bent over her hand with a gesture that betrayed the foreign blood in him, and his lips, hot and passionate, pressed her cold fingers. He did not utter a word. Only when he stood up again he looked at her with eyes that burned with the deep fires of manhood, and suddenly, all unbidden, the woman's heart in her quivered in response. She bent her head and turned away.

CHAPTER XIV

A MAN'S CONFIDENCE

"AREN'T you going to kiss Aunt Avery under the mistletoe?" asked Gracie.

"No," said Piers. "Aunt Avery may kiss me if she likes." He looked at Avery with his sudden, boyish laugh. "But I know she doesn't like, so that's an end of the matter."

"How do you know?" persisted Gracie. "She's very fond of kissing. And anyone may kiss under the mistletoe."

"That quite does away with the charm of it in my opinion," declared Piers. "I don't appreciate things when you can get 'em cheap."

He moved over to Jeanie's sofa and sat down on the edge. Her soft eyes smiled a welcome, the little thin hand slipped into his.

"I've been wishing for you all day long," she said.

He leaned towards her. "Have you, my fairy queen? Well, I'm here at last."

Avery, from the head of the schoolroom table, looked across at them with a feeling of fullness at her heart. She never liked Piers so well as when she saw him in company with her little favourite. His gentleness and chivalry made of him a very perfect knight.

"Yes," said Jeanie, giving his hand a little squeeze. "We're going to have our Christmas-tree to-night, and Doctor Tudor is coming. You don't like him, I know. But he's really quite a nice man."

She spoke the last words pleadingly, in response to a slight frown between Piers' brows.

"Oh, is he?" said Piers, without enthusiasm.

"He's been very kind," said Jeanie in a tone of apology.

"He'd better be anything else—to you!" said Piers, with a smile that was somewhat grim.

Jeanie's fingers caressed his again propitiatingly. "Do let's all be nice to each other just for to-night!" she said.

Piers' smile became tender again. "As your gracious majesty decrees!" he said. "Where is the ceremony to be held?"

"Up in the nursery. We've had the little ones in here all day, while mother and nurse have been getting it ready. I haven't seen it yet."

"Can't we creep up when no one's looking and have a private view?" suggested Piers.

Jeanie beamed at the idea. "I would like to, for I've been in the secret from the very beginning. But you must finish your tea first. We'll go when the crackers begin."

As the pulling of crackers was the signal for every child at the table to make as much noise as possible, it was not difficult to effect their retreat without exciting general attention. Avery alone noted their departure and smiled at Jeanie's flushed face as the child nodded farewell to her over Piers' shoulder.

"You do carry me so beautifully," Jeanie confided to him as he mounted the stairs to the top of the house. "I love the feel of your arms. They are so strong and kind. You're sure I'm not too heavy?"

"I could carry a dozen of you," said Piers.

They found the nursery brilliantly lighted and lavishly adorned with festoons of coloured paper.

"Aunt Avery and I did most of that," said Jeanie proudly.

Piers bore her round the room, admiring every detail, finally depositing her in a big arm-chair close to the tall screen that hid the Christmas-tree. Jeanie's leg was mending rapidly, and gave her little trouble now. She lay back contentedly, with shining eyes upon her cavalier.

"It was very nice of you to be so kind to Gracie last night," she said. "She told me all about it to-day. Of course, she ought not to have done it. I hope—I hope Sir Beverley wasn't angry about it."

Piers laughed a little. "Oh no! He got over it. Was Gracie scared?"

"Not really. She said she thought he wasn't quite pleased with you. I do hope he didn't think it was your fault."

"My shoulders are fairly broad," said Piers.

"Yes, but it wouldn't be right," maintained Jeanie. "I think I ought to write to him and explain."

"No, no!" said Piers. "You leave the old chap alone. He understands—quite as much as he wants to understand."

There was a note of bitterness in his voice which Jeanie was quick to discern. She reached up a sympathetic hand to his. "Dear Sir Galahad!" she said softly.

Piers looked down at her for a few moments in silence. And then, very suddenly, moved by the utter devotion that looked back at him from her eyes, he went down on his knees beside her and held her to his heart.

"It's a beast of a world, Jeanie," he said.

"Is it?" whispered Jeanie, with his hand pressed tight against her cheek.

There was silence between them for a little space; then she lifted her face to his, to murmur in a motherly tone, "I expect you're tired."

"Tired!" said Piers, with gloomy vehemence. "Yes, I am tired—sick to death of everything. I'm like a dog on a chain. I can see what I want, but it's always just out of my reach."

Jeanie's hand came up and softly stroked his face. "I wish I could get it for you," she said.

"Bless you, sweetheart!" said Piers. "You don't so much as know what it is, do you?"

"Yes, I do," said Jeanie. She leaned her head back against his shoulder, looking up into his face with all her child's soul shining in her eyes. "It's—Aunt Avery; isn't it?"

"How did you know?" said Piers.

"I don't know," said Jeanie. "It just—came to me—that day in the schoolroom when you talked about the ticket-of-leave. You were unhappy that day, weren't you?"

"Yes," said Piers. He added after a moment: "You see, I'm not good enough for her."

"Not good enough!" Jeanie's face became incredulous and a little distressed. "I'm sure—she—doesn't think that," she said.

"She doesn't know me properly," said Piers. "Nor do you. If you did, you'd be shocked—you'd be horrified."

He spoke recklessly, almost defiantly; but Jeanie only stretched up a thin arm and wound it about his neck. "Never!" she told him softly. "No, never!"

He held her to him; but he would not be silenced. "I assure you, I'm no saint," he said. "I feel more like a devil sometimes. I've done bad things, Jeanie. I can't tell you how bad. It would only hurt you."

The words ran out impulsively. His breathing came quick and short; his hold was tense. In that moment the child's pure spirit recognized that the image had crumbled in her shrine, but the brave heart of her did not flinch. Very tenderly she veiled the ruin. The element of worship had vanished in that single instant of revelation; but her love remained, and it shone out to him like a beacon as he knelt there in abasement by her side.

"But you're sorry," she whispered. "You would undo the bad things if you could."

"God knows I would!" he said.

"Perhaps He will undo them for you," she murmured softly. "Have you asked Him?"

"There are some things that can't be undone," groaned Piers. "It would be too big a job even for Him."

"Nothing is that," said Jeanie with conviction. "If we are sorry and if we pray, He will undo all the bad we've ever done some day."

"I haven't prayed for six years," said Piers. "Things went wrong with me. I felt as if I were under a curse. And I gave it up."

"Oh, Piers!" she said, holding him closer. "How miserable you must have been!"

"I've been in hell!" he said with bitter vehemence. "And the gates tight shut! Not that I was ever very great in the spiritual line," he added more calmly. "But I used to think God took a friendly interest in my affairs till—till I went down into hell and the gates shut on me; and then"—he spoke grimly—"I knew He didn't care a rap."

"But, dear, He does care!" said Jeanie very earnestly.

"He doesn't!" said Piers moodily. "He can't!"

"Piers, He does!" She raised her head and looked him straight in the eyes. "Everyone feels like that sometimes,"

she said. "But Aunt Avery says it's only because we are too little to understand. Won't you begin and pray again? It does make a difference, even though we can't see it."

"I can't," said Piers. And then with swift compunction he kissed her face of disappointment. "Never mind, my queen! Don't you bother your little head about me! I shall rub along all right even if I don't come out on top."

"But I want you to be happy," said Jeanie. "I wish I could help you, Piers—dear Piers."

"You do help me," said Piers.

There came the sound of voices on the stairs, and he got up.

Jeanie looked up at him wistfully. "I shall try," she said. "I shall try—hard."

He patted her head and turned away.

Mr. Lorimer and Miss Whalley entered the room. The former raised his brows momentarily at the sight of Piers, but he greeted him with much geniality.

"I am quite delighted to welcome you to the children's Christmas party," he declared, with Piers' hand held impressively in his. "And how is your grandfather, my dear lad?"

Piers contracted instinctively. "He is quite well, thanks," he said. "I haven't come to stay. I only looked in for a moment."

He glanced towards Miss Whalley, whom he had never met before. The Vicar smilingly introduced him. "This is the Squire's grandson and heir, Miss Whalley. Doubtless you know him by sight as well as by repute—the keenest sportsman in the county, eh, my young friend?" His eyes disappeared with the words as if pulled inwards by a string.

"I don't know," said Piers, becoming extremely blunt and British. "I'm certainly keen, but so are dozens of others." He bowed to Miss Whalley with stiff courtesy. "Pleased to meet you," he said formally.

Miss Whalley acknowledged the compliment with a severe air of incredulity. She had never approved of Piers since a certain Sunday morning ten years before, when she had caught him shooting at the choir boys with a catapult, during the Litany, over the top of the squire's large square pew.

She had reported the crime to the Vicar, and the Vicar had lodged a formal complaint with Sir Beverley, who had sourdly caned the delinquent in his presence, and given him half a sovereign as soon as the clerical back had been turned for taking the punishment like a man.

But in Miss Whalley's eyes Piers had from that moment ceased to be regarded as one of the elect, and his curt reception of the good Vicar's patronage did not further elevate him in her esteem. She made as brief a response to the introduction as politeness demanded, and crossed the room to Jeanie.

"I must be off," said Piers. "I've stayed longer than I intended already."

"Pray do not hurry!" urged Mr. Lorimer. "The festivities are but just beginning."

But Piers was insistent, and even Jeanie's wistful eyes could not detain him. He waved her a careless farewell, and extricated himself as quickly as possible from surroundings that had become uncongenial.

Descending the stairs somewhat precipitately, he nearly ran into Avery ascending with a troop of children, and stopped to say good-bye.

"You're not going!" cried Gracie, with keen disappointment.

"Yes, I am. I can't stop. It's later than I thought. See you to-morrow!" said Piers.

He held Avery's hand again in his, and for one fleeting second his eyes looked into hers. Then lightly he pressed her fingers and passed on without further words.

On the first landing he encountered Mrs. Lorimer. She smiled upon him kindly. "Oh, Piers, is it you?" she said. "Have you been having tea in the schoolroom?"

He admitted that he had.

"And must you really go?" she said. "I'm sorry for that. Come again, won't you?"

Her tone was full of gentle friendliness, and Piers was touched. "It's awfully good of you to ask me," he said.

"I like to see you here," she answered simply. "And I am so grateful to you for your kindness to my little Jeanie."

"Oh, please don't!" said Piers. "I assure you it's quite the other way round. I shall certainly come again since you are good enough to ask me."

He smiled with boyish gallantry into the wistful, faded face, carried her fingers lightly to his lips, and passed on.

"Such a nice boy!" Mrs. Lorimer murmured to herself as she went up to the nursery.

"Poor little soul!" was Piers' inward comment as he ran down to the hall.

Here he paused, finding himself face to face with Lennox Tudor, who was taking off his coat preparatory to ascending.

The doctor nodded to him without cordiality. Neither of them ever pretended to take any pleasure in the other's society.

"Are you just going?" he asked. "Your grandfather is wanting you."

"Who says so?" said Piers aggressively.

"I say so." Curtly Tudor made answer, meeting Piers' quick frown with one equally decided.

Piers stood still in front of him. "Have you just come from the Abbey?" he demanded.

"I have." Tudor's tone was non-committal. He stood facing Piers, waiting to pass.

"What are you always going there for?" burst forth Piers, with heat. "He doesn't want you—never follows your advice, and does excellently well without it."

"Really!" said Tudor. He uttered a short, sarcastic laugh, albeit his thick brows met closely above his glasses. "Well, you ought to know—being such a devoted and attentive grandson."

Piers' hands clenched at the words. He looked suddenly dangerous. "What in thunder do you mean?" he demanded.

Tudor was nothing loth to enlighten him. He was plainly angry himself. "I mean," he said, "if you must have it, that the time you spend philandering here would be better employed in looking after the old man, who has spent a good deal over you and gets precious little interest out of the investment."

"Confound you!" exclaimed Piers violently. "Who the devil are you to talk to me like this? Do you think I'm going to put up with it—what? If so, you're damned well mistaken. You leave me alone—and my grandfather too do you hear? If you don't——" He broke off, breathing short and hard.

But Tudor remained unimpressed. He looked at Piers

as one might look at an animal raging behind bars. "Well?" he said. "Pray finish! If I don't——"

Piers' face was very pale. His eyes blazed out of it, red and threatening. "If you don't—I'll murder you!" he said.

And at that he stopped short and suddenly wheeled round as he caught the swish of a dress on the stairs. He looked up into Avery's face as she came swiftly down, and the blood rose in a deep, dark wave to his forehead. He made no attempt to cover or excuse his passionate outburst, which it was perfectly obvious she must have heard. He merely made way for her, his hands still hard clenched, his eyes immovably upon her.

Avery passed him with scarcely a glance, but her voice as she addressed Lennox Tudor sounded a trifle austere. "I heard you speaking," she said, "and ran down to fetch you upstairs. Will you come up at once, please? The ceremony is just beginning."

Tudor held out a steady hand. "Very kind of you, Mrs. Denys," he said. "Will you lead the way?" And then for a moment he turned from her to Piers. "If you have any thing further to say to me, Evesham, I shall be quite ready to give you a hearing on a more suitable occasion."

"I have nothing further to say," said Piers, still with his eyes upon Avery.

She would not look at him. With deliberate intention she ignored his look. "Come, Doctor!" she said.

They mounted the stairs together, Piers still standing motionless, still mutely watching. There was no temper or anger in his face. Simply he stood and waited. And, as if that silent gaze drew her, even against her will, suddenly at the top she turned. Her own sweet smile flashed into her face. She threw a friendly glance down to him.

"Good night, Mr. Evesham!" she called softly. "A happy Christmas to you!"

And as if that were what he had been waiting for, Piers bowed very low in answer and at once turned away.

His face as he went out into the night wore a very curious expression. It was not grim, or ashamed, or triumphant, and yet there was in it a suggestion of all three moods.

He reached his car, standing as he had left it in the deserted lane, and stooped to start the engine. Then, as it throbbed

in answer, he straightened himself, and very suddenly he laughed. But it was not a happy laugh; and in a moment more he shot away into the dark, as though pursued by fiends. If he had gained his end, if he had in any fashion achieved his desire, it was plain that it did not give him any great satisfaction. He went like a fury through the night.

CHAPTER XV

THE SCHEME

"LOOK here, boy!" Very suddenly, almost fiercely, Sir Beverley addressed his grandson that evening as they sat together over dessert. "I've had enough of this infernal English climate. I'm going away."

Piers was peeling a walnut. He did not raise his eyes or make the faintest sign of surprise. Steadily his fingers continued their task. His lips hardened a little, that was all.

"Do you hear?" rapped out Sir Beverley.

Piers bent his head. "What about the hunting?" he said.

"Damn the hunting!" growled Sir Beverley.

Piers was silent a moment. Then: "I suggested it to you myself, didn't I?" he said deliberately, "six weeks ago. And you wouldn't hear of it."

"Confound your impertinence!" began Sir Beverley. But abruptly Piers raised his eyes, and he stopped. "What do you mean?" he said, in a calmer tone.

Very steadily Piers met his look. "That's a question I should like to ask, sir," he said. "Why do you want to go abroad? Aren't you well?"

"I am perfectly well," declared Sir Beverley, who furiously resented any enquiry as to his health. "Can't a man take it into his head that he'd like a change from this beastly damp hole of a country without being at death's door, I should like to know?"

"You generally have a reason for what you do, sir," observed Piers.

"Of course I have a reason," flung back Sir Beverley.

A faint smile touched the corners of Piers' mouth. "But I am not to know what it is—what?" he asked.

Sir Beverley glared at him. There were times when he was possessed by an uneasy suspicion that the boy was growing up into a manhood that threatened to overthrow his control. He had a feeling that Piers' submission to his authority had become a matter of choice rather than of necessity. He had inherited his Italian grandmother's fortune, moreover—a sore point with Sir Beverley, who would have repudiated every penny, had it been left at his disposal—and was therefore independent.

"I've given you a reason. What more do you want?" he growled.

Piers looked straight at him for a few seconds longer; then broke into his sudden boyish laugh. "All right, sir. When shall we start?" he said.

Sir Beverley stared. "What the devil are you laughing at?" he demanded.

Piers had returned to the peeling of his walnut. "Nothing, sir," he said airily. "At least, nothing more important than your reason for going abroad."

"Damn your impudence!" said Sir Beverley, and then for some reason he, too, began to smile. "That's settled, then. We'll go to Monte Carlo, eh, Piers? You'll like that."

"Do you think I am to be trusted at Monte Carlo?" said Piers.

"I let you go round the world by yourself while you were still an infant, so I almost think I can trust you at Monte Carlo under my own eye," returned Sir Beverley.

Piers was silent. The smile had left his lips. He frowned slightly over his task.

"Well?" said Sir Beverley, suddenly and sharply.

"Well, sir?" Piers raised his brows without looking up.

The old man brought down an impatient fist on the table. "Why can't you say what you think?" he demanded angrily. "You sit there with your mouth shut as if—as if——" His eyes went suddenly to the woman's face on the wall with the red lips that smiled half sadly, half mockingly, and the eyes that perpetually followed him but never smiled at all. "Confound you, Piers!" he said. "I sometimes think that voyage round the world did you more harm than good."

"Why, sir?" said Piers quickly.

Sir Beverley's look left the smiling, baffling face upon the

wall and sought his grandson's. "You were so mad to be off the bearing-rein, weren't you?" he said. "So keen to feel your own feet? I thought it would make a man of you, but I was a fool to do it. I'd better have kept you on the rein, after all."

"I should have run away if you had," said Piers. He poured himself out a glass of wine and raised it to his lips. He looked at Sir Beverley above it with a smile half sad, half mocking, and eyes that veiled his soul. "I should have gone to the devil if you had, sir," he said, "and—probably—I shouldn't have come back." He drank slowly, his eyes still upon Sir Beverley's face.

When he set the glass down again he was openly laughing. "Besides, you horsewhipped me for something or other, do you remember? It hurts to be horsewhipped at nineteen."

Sir Beverley growled at him inarticulately.

"Yes, I know," said Piers. "But it doesn't affect me so much now. I'm past the sensitive age." He ate his walnut, drained his glass, and rose.

"You—puppy!" said Sir Beverley, looking up at him.

Piers came to his side. He knelt suddenly down and pulled the old man's arm round his shoulders. "I say, I'm going to enjoy that trip," he said boyishly. "Let's get away before the New Year!"

Sir Beverley suffered the action with no further protest than a frown. "You weren't so mighty anxious when I first suggested it," he grumbled.

Piers laughed. "Can't a man change his mind? I'm keen enough now."

"What do you want to go for?" Sir Beverley looked at him suspiciously.

But Piers' frank return of his look told him nothing. "I love the South, as you know," he said.

"Damn it, yes!" said Sir Beverley irritably. He could never endure any mention of the Southern blood in Piers.

"And"—Piers' brown fingers grew suddenly tight upon the bony hand he had drawn over his shoulder—"I like going away with you."

"Oh, stow it, Piers!" growled Sir Beverley.

"The truth, sir!" protested Piers, with eyes that suddenly danced. "It does me good to be with you. It keeps me young."

"Young!" ejaculated Sir Beverley. "You—infant!"

Piers broke into a laugh. He looked a mere boy when he gave himself up to merriment. "And it'll do you good too," he said, "to get away from that beastly doctor who is always hanging around. I long to give him the boot whenever I see him."

"You don't like each other, eh?" Sir Beverley's smile was sardonic.

"We loathe and detest each other," said Piers. All the boyishness went out of his face with the words; he looked suddenly grim, and in that moment the likeness between them was very marked. "I presume this change of air scheme was his suggestion," he said abruptly.

"And if it was?" said Sir Beverley.

Piers threw back his head and laughed again through clenched teeth. "For which piece of consideration he has my sincere gratitude," he said. He pressed his grandfather's hand again and rose. "So it's to be Monte Carlo, is it? Well, the sooner the better for me. I'll tell Victor to look up the trains. We can't get away to-morrow or the next day. But we ought to be able to manage the day after."

He strolled across to the fire, and stood there with his back to the room, whistling below his breath.

Sir Beverley regarded him frowningly. There was no denying the fact, he did not understand Piers. He had expected a strenuous opposition to his scheme. He had been prepared to do battle with the boy. But Piers had refused the conflict. What was the fellow's game, he asked himself? Why this prompt compliance with his wishes? He was not to be deceived into the belief that he wanted to go. The attraction was too great for that. Unless, indeed—he looked across at the bent black head in sudden doubt—was it possible that the boy had met with a check in the least likely direction of all? Could it be that the woman's plans did not include him, after all?

No, no! That was out of the question. He knew women. A hard laugh rose to his lips. If she had put a check upon Piers' advances it was not with the ultimate purpose of stopping him. She knew what she was about too well for that, confound her!

He stared at Piers, who had wheeled suddenly from the fire

at the sound of the laugh. "Well?" he said irritably. "Well? What's the matter now?"

The eyes that countered his were hard, with just a hint of defiance. "You laughed, sir," said Piers curtly.

"Well, what of it?" threw back Sir Beverley. "You're deuced suspicious. I wasn't laughing at you."

"I know that," said Piers. He spoke deliberately, as one choosing his words. His face was stern. "I don't want to know the joke if it's private. But I should like to know how long you want to be away?"

"How long? How the devil can I tell?" growled Sir Beverley. "Till I've had enough of it, I suppose."

"Does it depend on that only?" said Piers.

Sir Beverley pushed back his chair with fierce impatience. "Oh, leave me alone, boy, do! I'll let you know when it's time to come home again."

Piers came towards him. He halted with the light from the lamp full on his resolute face. "If you are going to wait on Tudor's convenience," he said, "you'll wait—longer than I shall."

"What the devil do you mean?" thundered Sir Beverley.

But again Piers turned aside from open conflict. He put a quiet hand through his grandfather's arm.

"Come along, sir! We'll smoke in the hall," he said. "I think you understand me. If you don't"—he paused, and smiled his sudden, winning smile into the old man's wrathful eyes—"I'll explain more fully when the time comes."

"Confound you, Piers!" was Sir Beverley's only answer.

Yet he left the room with the boy's arm linked in his. And the woman's face on the wall smiled behind him—the smile of a witch, mysterious, derisive, aloof, yet touched with that same magic with which Piers had learned even in his infancy to charm away the evil spirit that lurked in his grandfather's soul.

CHAPTER XVI

THE WARNING

"GOING away to-morrow, are you?" said Ina Rose, in her cool young voice. "I hope you'll enjoy it."

"Thanks!" said Piers. "No doubt I shall."

He spoke with his eyes on the dainty lace fan he had taken from her.

Ina frankly studied his face. She had always found Piers Evesham interesting.

"I should be wild if I were in your place," she remarked, after a moment.

He shrugged his shoulders, and his brown face slightly smiled. "Because of the hunting?" he said, and turned his eyes upon her fresh, girlish face. "But there's always next year—what?"

"Good gracious!" said Ina. "You talk as if you were older than your grandfather. It wouldn't comfort me in the least to think of next season's hunting. And I don't believe it does you, either. You are only putting it on."

"All right!" said Piers. His eyes dwelt upon her with a species of mocking homage that yet in a fashion subtly flattered. He always knew how to please Ina Rose, though not always did he take the trouble. "Let us say—for the sake of argument—that I am quite inconsolable... It doesn't matter to anyone, does it?"

"I don't know why you should say that," said Ina. "It ought to matter—anyhow, to your grandfather. Why don't you make him go by himself?"

Piers laughed a careless laugh, still boldly watching her. "That wouldn't be very dutiful of me, would it?" he said.

"I suppose you're not afraid of him?" said Ina, who knew not the meaning of the word.

"Why should you suppose that?" said Piers.

She met his look in momentary surprise. "To judge by the way you behaved the other day, I should say you were not."

Piers frowned. "Which day?"

Ina explained without embarrassment. "The day that girl held up the whole Hunt in Holland's meadow. My word, Piers, how furious the old man was! Does he often behave like that?"

Piers still frowned. His fingers were working restlessly at the ivory sticks of her fan. "If you mean, does he often thrash me with a horsewhip, no, he doesn't," he said shortly. "And he wouldn't have done it then if I'd had a hand to spare. I'm glad you enjoyed the spectacle. Hope you were all edified."

"You needn't be waxy," said Ina calmly. "I assure you, you never showed to greater advantage. I hope your lady friend was duly grateful to her deliverer. I rather liked her pluck, Piers. Who is she?"

There was a sudden crack between Piers' fingers. He looked down hastily, and in a moment displayed three broken ivory fan-sticks to the girl beside him. "I'm horribly sorry, Ina," he said.

Ina looked at the damage, and from it to his face of contrition. "You did it on purpose," she said.

"I did not," said Piers.

"You're very rude," she rejoined.

"No, I'm not," he protested. "I'm sorry. I hope you didn't value it for any particular reason. I'll send you another from Paris."

She spurned the broken thing with a careless gesture. "Not you! You'd be afraid to."

Piers' brows went up. "Afraid?"

"Of your grandfather," she said, with a derisive smile. "If he caught you sending anything to me—or to the lady of the meadow——" she paused eloquently.

Piers looked grim. "Of course I shall send you a fan, if you'll accept it."

"How nice of you!" said Ina. "Wouldn't you like to send something for her in the same parcel? I'll deliver it for you—if you'll tell me the lady's address."

Her eyes sparkled mischievously as she made the suggestion. Piers frowned yet a moment longer, then laughed back with abrupt friendliness.

"Thanks awfully! But I won't trouble you. It's decent of you not to be angry over this. I'll get you a ripping one to make up."

Ina nodded. "That'll be quite amusing. Everyone will think that you're really in earnest at last. Poor Dick will be furious when he knows."

"You'll probably console him pretty soon," returned Piers.

"Think so?" Ina's eyes narrowed a little; she looked at Piers speculatively. "That's what you want to believe, is it?"

"I? Of course not!" Piers laughed again. "I never wished any girl engaged yet."

"Save one," suggested Ina, and an odd little gleam hovered behind her lashes with the words. "Why won't you tell me her name? You might as well."

"Why?" said Piers.

"I shall find it out in any case," she assured him. "I know already that she dwells under the Vicar's virtuous roof, and that the worthy Doctor Tudor finds it necessary to drop in every day. I suppose she is the nurse-cook-housekeeper of that establishment."

"I say, how clever of you!" said Piers.

The girl laughed carelessly. "Isn't it? I've studied her in church—and you too, my cavalier. I don't believe you have ever attended so regularly before, have you? Did she ever tell you her age?"

"Never," said Piers.

"I wonder," said Ina coolly. And then rather suddenly she rose. "Piers, if I'm a prying cat, you're a hard-mouthed mule! There! Why can't you admit that you're in love with her?"

Piers faced her with no sign of surprise. "Why don't you tell me that you're in love with Guyes?" he said.

"Because it wouldn't be true!" She flung back her answer with a laugh that sounded unaccountably bitter. "I have yet to meet the man who is worth the trouble."

"Oh, really!" said Piers. "Don't flatter us more than you need! I'm sorry for Guyes myself. If he weren't so keen on you, it's my belief you'd like him better."

"Oh, no, I shouldn't!" Ina spoke with a touch of scorn. "I shouldn't like him either less or more, whatever he did. I couldn't. But of course he's extremely eligible, isn't he?"

"Does that count with you?" said Piers curiously.

She looked at him. "It doesn't with you, of course?" she said.

"Not in the least," he returned with emphasis.

She laughed again, and pushed the remnants of her fan with her foot. "It wouldn't. You're so charmingly young and romantic. Well, mind the doctor doesn't cut you out in your absence! He would be a much more suitable *parti* for her, you know, both as to age and station. Shall we go back to the ball-room now? I am engaged to Dick for the next dance. I mustn't cut him in his own house."

It was an annual affair, but quite informal—this Boxing Night dance at the Guyes'. Dick himself called it a survival of his schoolboy days, and it was always referred to in the neighbourhood as "Dick's Christmas party." He and his mother would no more have dreamed of discontinuing the festivity than of foregoing their Christmas dinner, and the Roses of Wardenhurst were invariably invited and as invariably attended it. Piers was not so constant a guest. Dick had thrown him an open invitation on the hunting-field a day or two before, and Piers, having nothing better to do, had decided to present himself.

He liked dancing, and was easily the best dancer among the men. He also liked Ina Rose, or, at least, she had always thought so till that night. They were friends of the hunting-field rather than the drawing-room, but they always drifted together wherever they met. Sir Beverley had never troubled himself about the intimacy. The girl belonged to the county, and if not quite the brilliant match for Piers that he would have chosen, she came at least of good old English stock. He knew and liked her father, and he would not have made any very strenuous opposition to an alliance between the two. The girl was well bred and heiress to the Colonel's estate. She would have added considerably to Piers' importance as a landowner, and she knew already how to hold up her head in society. Also, she led a wholesome, out-door existence, and was not the sort of girl to play with a man's honour.

No, on the whole, Sir Beverley had no serious objection to the prospect of a marriage between them, save that he had no desire to see Piers married for another five years at least. But Ina could very well afford to wait five years for such a prize as Piers. Meanwhile, if they cared to get engaged—it would keep the boy out of mischief, and there would be no harm in it.

So had run Sir Beverley's thoughts prior to the appearance of the mother's help at the Vicarage. But she—the woman with the resolute mouth and grey, steadfast eyes—had upset all his calculations. It had not needed Lennox Tudor's hint to put him on his guard. He had known whither the boy's wayward fancy was tending before that. The scene in the hunting-field had been sufficient revelation for him, and had lent strength to his arm and fury to his indignation.

Piers' decision to spend his last night in England at a dance had been a surprise to him, but then the boy had puzzled him a good many times of late. He had even asked himself once or twice if it had been his deliberate intention to do so. But since it was absolutely certain that the schemer at the Vicarage would not be present at Dick Guyes' party, Sir Beverley did not see any urgent necessity for keeping his grandson at his side. He even hoped that Piers would enjoy himself, though he deemed him a fool to go.

And, to judge from appearances, Piers was enjoying himself. Having parted from Ina, he claimed for his partner his hostess—a pretty, graceful woman, who danced under protest, but so exquisitely that he would hardly be persuaded to give her up when the dance was over.

He scarcely left the ball-room for the rest of the evening, and when the party broke up, he was among the last to leave. Dick ingenuously thanked him for helping to make the affair a success. He was not feeling particularly happy himself, since Ina had consistently snubbed him throughout; but he did not hold Piers in any way responsible for her attitude. Dick's outlook on life was supremely simple. He never attempted to comprehend the ways of women, being serenely content to regard them as beyond his comprehension. He hoped and believed that one day Ina would be kind to him, but he was quite prepared to wait an indefinite time for that day to dawn. He took all rebuffs with resignation, and could generally muster a smile soon after.

He smiled tranquilly upon Piers at parting and congratulated him upon the prospect of missing the worst of the winter. To which Piers threw back a laugh as he drove away in his little two-seater, coupled with the careless assurance that he meant to make the most of his time, whatever the weather.

"Lucky dog!" said Guyon, as he watched him disappear down the drive.

But if he had seen the expression that succeeded Piers' laugh, he might have suppressed the remark. For Piers' face, as he raced alone through the darkness, was the set, grim face of a man who carries a deadly purpose in his soul. He had laughed and danced throughout the evening, but in his first moment of solitude the devil he had kept at bay had entered into full possession.

To the rush and throb of his engine, he heard over and over the gibing, malicious words of a girl's sore heart: "Mind the doctor doesn't cut you out in your absence!"

Obviously, then, this affair was the common talk of the neighbourhood since news of it had even penetrated to Wardenhurst. People were openly watching the rivalry between Lennox Tudor and himself, watching and speculating as to the result. And he, about to be ignominiously removed from the conflict by his grandfather, at Tudor's suggestion, had become the laughing-stock of the place. Piers' teeth nearly met in his lower lip. Let them laugh! And let them chatter! He would give them ample food for amusement and gossip before he left.

He had yielded to his grandfather's desire because instinct had told him that his absence just at that stage of his wooing would be more beneficial than his presence. He was shrewd enough to realize that the hot blood in him was driving him too fast, urging him to a pace which might irreparably damage his cause. For that reason alone, he was ready to curb his fierce impetuosity. But to leave a free field for Lennox Tudor was not a part of his plan. He had scarcely begun to regard the man in the light of a serious rival, although fully aware of the fact that Tudor was doing his utmost to remove him from his path. But if Ina thought him so, he had probably under-estimated the danger.

He had always detested Tudor very thoroughly. Piers never did anything by halves, and the doctor's undisguised criticism of him never failed to arouse his fiercest resentment. That Tudor disliked him in return was a fact that could scarcely escape the notice of the most careless observer. The two were plainly antipathetic, and were scarcely civil to one another even in public.

But that night Piers' antagonism flared to a deadly hatred.

The smouldering fire had leaped to a fierce blaze. Two nights before he had smothered it with the exultant conviction that Tudor's chances with Avery were practically non-existent. He had known with absolute certainty that he was not the type of man to attract her. But to-night his mood had changed. Whether Tudor's chances had improved or not he scarcely stopped to question, but that other people regarded them as possibly greater than his own was a fact that sent the mad blood to his head. He tore back through the winter night like a man possessed, with Ina Rose's scoffing warning beating a devil's tattoo in his brain.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PLACE OF TORMENT

THE surgery-bell pealed imperiously, and Tudor looked up from his book. It was his custom to read far into the night, for he was a poor sleeper, and preferred a cosy fireside to his bed. But that night he was even later than usual. Glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece, he saw that it was a quarter to two. With a shrug of the shoulders expressive rather of weariness than indifference, he rose to answer the bell.

It pealed again before he reached the door, and the doctor frowned. He was never very tolerant of impatience. He unfastened the bolts without haste. The case might be urgent, but a steady hand and cool nerve were usually even more essential than speed in his opinion. He opened the door, therefore, with a certain deliberation, and faced the sharp night air with grim resignation. "Well? Who is it? Come in!"

He expected to see some village messenger, and the sight of Piers, stern-faced, with the fur collar of his motor-coat turned up to his ears, was a complete surprise.

"Hullo!" he said, staring at him. "Anything wrong?"

Piers stared back with eyes of burning hostility. "I want a word with you," he announced curtly. "Will you come out, or shall I come in?"

"You'd better come in," said Tudor, suppressing a shiver, "unless I'm wanted up at the Abbey."

"You're not," said Piers.

He stepped into the passage, and impetuously stripped off his heavy coat. Tudor shut the door, and turned round. He surveyed his visitor's evening-dress with a touch of contempt. He himself was clad in an ancient smoking-jacket, much frayed at the cuffs; and his carpet slippers were so trodden down at the heel that he could only just manage to shuffle along in them.

"Go into the consulting-room!" he said. "There's a light there."

Piers strode in and waited for him. Seen by the light of the gas that burned there, his face was pale and set in lines of iron determination. His eyes shone out of it like the eyes of an infuriated wild beast.

"Do you know what I've come for?" he said, as Tudor shambled into the room.

Tudor looked him over briefly and comprehensively. "No, I don't," he said. "I hoped I'd seen the last of you."

His words were as brief as his look. It was obvious that he had no intention of wasting time in mere courtesy.

Piers' lips tightened at his tone. He looked full and straight at the baffling glasses that hid the other man's contemptuous eyes.

"I've come for a reckoning with you," he said.

"Really?" said Tudor. He glanced again at the clock. "Rather an unusual hour, isn't it?"

Piers passed the question by. He was chafing on his feet like a caged animal. Abruptly he came to the point.

"I told you the other day that I wouldn't put up with any interference from you. I didn't know then how far your interference had gone. I do know now. This scheme to get me out of the country was of your contrivance."

Fiercely he flung his words. He was quivering with passionate indignation. But the effect on Tudor was scarcely perceptible. He only looked a little colder, a little more satirical, than was his wont.

"Well?" he said. "What of it?"

Piers showed his teeth momentarily. His hands were hard gripped behind him, as though he restrained himself by main force from open violence.

"You don't deny it?" he said.

"Why should I?" Tudor's thin lips displayed a faint sneer. "I certainly advised your grandfather to go away, and I think the advice was sound."

"It was—from your point of view." A tremor of fierce humour ran through Piers' speech. "But plans—even clever ones—don't always turn out as they should. This one, for instance—what do you think you are going to gain by it?"

"What do you mean?" Tudor stood by the table facing Piers, his attitude one of supreme indifference. He seemed scarcely to feel the stormy atmosphere that pulsated almost visibly around the younger man. His eyes behind their glasses were cold and shrewd, wholly emotionless.

Piers paused an instant to grip his self-control the harder, for every word he uttered seemed to make his hold the more precarious.

"I'll tell you what I mean," he said, his voice low and savagely distinct. "I mean that what you've done—all this sneaking and scheming to get me out of your way—isn't going to serve your purpose. I mean that you shall swear to me here and now to give up the game during my absence, or take the consequences. It is entirely due to you that I am going, but—by Heaven—you shall reap no advantage from it!"

His voice rose a little, and the menace of it became more apparent. He bent slightly towards the man he threatened. His eyes blazed red and dangerous. Tudor stood his ground, but it was impossible any longer to ignore Piers' open fury. It was like the blast of a hurricane hurled full against him. He made a slight gesture of remonstrance.

"My good fellow, all this excitement is utterly uncalled for. The advice I gave your grandfather would, I am convinced, have been given by any other medical man in the country. If you are not satisfied with it, you had better get him to have another opinion. As to taking advantage of your absence, I really don't know what you mean, and I think if you are wise you won't stop to explain. It's getting late, and if you don't value your night's rest, I can't do without mine. Also, I think when the morning comes you'll be ashamed of this foolery."

He spoke with studied coldness. He knew the value of a firm front when facing odds. But he did not know the fiery

soul of the man before him, or realize that contempt poured upon outraged pride is as spirit poured upon flame.

He saw the devil in Piers' eyes too late to change his tactics. Almost in the same moment the last shred of Piers' self-control vanished like smoke in a gale. He uttered a fearful oath and sprang upon Tudor like an animal freed from a leash.

The struggle that followed was furious, if brief. Tudor's temper, once thoroughly roused, was as fierce as any man's, and though his knowledge of the science of fighting was wholly elementary, he made a desperate resistance. It lasted for possibly thirty seconds, and then he found himself flung violently backwards across the table and pinned there, with Piers' hands gripping his throat, and Piers' eyes, grim and murderous, glaring down into his own.

"Be still!" ordered Piers, his voice no more than a whisper. "Or I'll kill you—by Heaven, I will!"

He was utterly powerless in that relentless grip. His heart was pumping with great hammer-strokes; his breathing came laboured between those merciless hands. His own hands were closed upon the iron wrists, but their hold was weakening moment by moment, he knew their grasp to be wholly ineffectual. He obeyed the order because he lacked the strength to do otherwise.

Piers slowly slackened his grip. "Now," he said, speaking between lips that scarcely seemed to move, "you will make me that promise."

"What—promise?" Gaspingly Tudor uttered the question, yet something of the habitual sneer which he always kept for Piers distorted his mouth as he spoke. He was not an easy man to beat, despite his physical limitations.

Sternly and implacably Piers answered him: "You will swear—by all you hold sacred—to take no advantage whatever of me while I am away. You had a special purpose in view when you planned to get me out of the way. You will swear to give up that purpose till I come back."

"I?" said Tudor.

Just the one word flung upwards at his conqueror, but carrying with it a defiance so complete that even Piers was for the moment taken by surprise! Then, the devil urging him, he tightened his grip again. "Either that," he said, "or——"

He left the sentence unfinished. His hands completed the threat. He had passed the bounds of civilization, and his savagery whirled him like a fiery torrent through the gaping jaws of hell. The maddening flames were all around him, the shrieking of demons was in his ears, driving him on to destruction. He went, blinded by passion, goaded by the intolerable stabs of jealousy. In those moments he was conscious of nothing save a wild delirium of anger against the man who, beaten, yet resisted him, yet threw him his disdainful refusal to surrender even in the face of overwhelming defeat.

But the brief respite had given Tudor a transient renewal of strength. Ere that terrible grip could wholly lock again he made another frantic effort to free himself. Spasmodic as it was, and wholly unconsidered, yet it had the advantage of being unexpected. Piers shifted his hold, and in that instant Tudor found and gripped the edge of the table. Sharply, with desperate strength, he dragged himself sideways, and before his adversary could prevent it, he was over the edge. He fell heavily, dragging Piers with him, struck his head with violence against the table-leg, and crumpled with the blow like an empty sack.

Piers found himself gripping a limp, inanimate object, and with a sudden sense of overpowering horror he desisted. He stumbled up, staggering slightly, and drew a long, hard breath. His heart was racing like a runaway engine. All the blood in his body seemed to be concentrated there. Almost mechanically he waited for it to slow down. And, as he waited, the madness of that wild rush through hell fell away from him. The demons that had driven him passed into distance. He was left standing in a place of desolation, utterly and terribly alone.

* * * * * * *

A trickle of cold water ran down Tudor's chin. He put up a hesitating, groping hand, and opened his eyes.

He was lying in the arm-chair before the fire in which he had spent the evening. The light danced before him in blurred flashes.

"Hullo!" he muttered thickly. "I've been asleep."

He remained passive for a few moments, trying, not very successfully, to collect his scattered senses. Then, with an

effort that seemed curiously laboured, he sat slowly up. Instinctively, his eyes went to the clock above him, but the hands of it seemed to be swinging round and round. He stared at it bewildered.

But when he tried to rise and investigate the mystery, the whole room began to spin, and he sank back with a feeling of intense sickness.

It was then that he became aware of another presence. Someone came from behind him and, stooping, held a tumbler to his lips. He looked up vaguely, and as in a dream he saw the face of Piers Evesham.

But it was Piers as he had never before seen him, white-lipped, unnerved, shaking. The hand that held the glass trembled almost beyond control.

"What's the matter?" questioned Tudor in hazy wonder. "Have you been boozing, or have I?"

And then, his perceptions growing stronger, he took the glass from the quivering hand and slowly drank.

The draught steadied him. He looked up with more assurance, and saw Piers, still with that deathly look on his face, leaning against the mantelpiece for support.

"What on earth's the matter?" said Tudor sharply.

He felt for his glasses, found them dangling over his shoulder, and put them on. One of them was cracked across, an illuminating fact which accounted for much. He looked keenly at Piers for several quiet seconds.

At length, with a shade of humour he spoke. "Here endeth the first lesson! You'd make a better show if you had a drink also. I'm sorry there's only one glass. You see, I wasn't expecting any friends to-night."

Piers started a little and straightened himself; but his face remained bloodless, and there was a curiously stunned look in his eyes. He did not attempt to utter a word.

Tudor drained his glass, sat a moment or two longer, then got up. There were brandy and water on his writing-table. He poured out a stiff dose, and turned to Piers with authority.

"Pull yourself together, Evesham! I should have thought you'd made a big enough fool of yourself for one night. Drink this! Don't spill it now! And don't sit down on the fire, for I don't feel equal to pulling you off!"

His manner was briskly professional, the manner he usually reserved for the hysterical portion of his patients. He was still feeling decidedly shaky himself, but Piers' collapse was an admirable restorative. He stood by, vigilant and resolute, while the brandy did its work.

Piers drank in silence, not looking at him. All the arrogance had gone out of him. He looked broken and unmanned.

"Better?" asked Tudor at length.

He nodded mutely, and set down the glass.

Tudor surveyed him questioningly. "What happened to you?" he asked finally.

"Nothing!" Piers found his voice at last; it was low and shamed. "Nothing whatever! You—you—my God! —I thought you were dead, that's all."

"That all?" said Tudor. He put his hand up to his temple. There was a fair-sized lump there already, and it was swelling rapidly.

Piers nodded again. The deathly pallor had gone from his face, but he still avoided Tudor's eyes. He spoke again, below his breath, as if more to himself than to Tudor.

"You looked so horribly like—like—a man I once—saw killed."

"If you are wise, you will go home to bed," said Tudor gruffly.

Piers flashed a swift look at him. He stood hesitating. "You're not really hurt?" he questioned, after a moment.

"Thank you," said Tudor dryly, "I am not."

He made no movement of reconciliation. Perhaps it was hardly to be expected of him. Piers made none either. He turned away in silence.

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed the hour. Two o'clock! Tudor looked at it with a wry smile. It had been a lively quarter of an hour.

The surgery door banged upon Piers' departure. He heard his feet move heavily to the gate, and the dull clang of the latter closing behind him. Then, after a protracted pause, there came the sound of his motor.

As this throbbed away into distance Tudor smiled again grimly, ironically. "Yes, you young ruffian," he said. "It's given your nerves a nasty jolt, and serve you jolly well right! I never saw any fellow in such a mortal funk before, and—from your somewhat rash remark—I gather

that it's not the first lesson, after all. I wonder when—and how—you killed that other man."

He was still speculating as he turned out the light and went to his room.

CHAPTER XVIII

HORNS AND HOOFS

IT was the Reverend Stephen Lorimer's custom to have all letters that arrived by the morning post placed beside his breakfast plate to be sorted by him at the end of family prayers—a custom which Gracie freely criticized in the sanctuary of the schoolroom, and which her mother in earlier days had gently and quite ineffectually tried to stop. It was always a somewhat lengthy proceeding, as it entailed a careful scrutiny of each envelope, especially in the case of letters not addressed to the Reverend Stephen. He was well acquainted with the handwriting of all his wife's correspondents, and was generally ready with some shrewd guess as to their motives for writing. They were usually submitted to him for perusal as soon as she had read them herself, a habit formed by Mrs. Lorimer when she discovered that he looked upon her correspondence as his own property, and deeply resented any inclination on her part to keep it to herself.

Avery's arrival had brought an additional interest to the morning budget. Her letters were invariably examined with bland curiosity, and handed on to her with comments appropriate to their appearance. Occasionally envelopes with an Australian postmark reached her, and these always excited especial notice. The brief spell of Avery's married life had been spent in a corner of New South Wales. In the early part of their acquaintance Mr. Lorimer had sought to draw her out on the subject of her experiences during this period, but he had found her reticent. And so, whenever a letter came addressed in the strong, masculine hand of her Australian correspondent, some urbane remark was invariably made, while his small daughter Gracie swelled with indignation at the further end of the table.

"Two epistles for Mrs. Denys!" he announced, as he turned over the morning's mail at the breakfast-table two

days after Christmas. "Ah, I thought our Australian friend would be calling attention to himself ere the festive season had quite departed. He writes from Adelaide on this occasion. That indicates a move, if I mistake not. His usual *pied-à-terre* has been Brisbane hitherto, has it not?"

His little dark eyes interrogated Avery for a moment before they vanished inwards with disconcerting completeness.

Avery stiffened instinctively. She was well aware that Mr. Lorimer did not like her, but the fact held no disturbing element. To her mind the dislike of the man was preferable to his favour, and, after all, she saw but little of him.

She went on, therefore, with her occupation of cutting bread and butter for the children with no sign of annoyance save that slight, scarcely perceptible stiffening of the neck which only Gracie saw.

"I hope you are kind to your faithful correspondent," smiled Mr. Lorimer, still holding the letter between his finger and thumb. "He evidently regards your friendship as a pearl of price, and doubtless he is well-advised to do so."

Here he opened his eyes again, and sent a barbed glance at Avery's unresponsive face.

"Friendship is a beautiful thing, is it not?" he said.

"It is," said Avery, deftly cutting her fifth slice.

The Reverend Stephen proceeded with clerical fervour to embellish his subject, for no especial reason save the pleasure of listening to his own eloquence—a pleasure which never palled. "It partakes of that divine quality of charity so sadly lacking in many of us, and sheds golden beams of sunshine in the humblest earthly home. It has been aptly called the true earnest of eternity."

"Really!" said Avery.

"An exquisite thought, is it not?" said the Vicar. "Grace, my child, for the one-and-twentieth time I must beg of you not to swing your legs when sitting at table."

"I wasn't," said Gracie.

Her father's brows were elevated in surprise. His eyes, as a consequence, were opened rather wider than usual, revealing an unmistakably malignant gleam.

"That is not the way in which a Christian child should receive admonition," he said. "If you were not swinging

your legs, you were fidgeting in a fashion which you very well know to be unmannerly. Do not let me have to complain of your behaviour again!"

Gracie's cheeks were crimson, her violet eyes blazing with resentment; and Avery, dreading an outburst, laid a gentle, restraining hand upon her shoulder for an instant.

The action was well meant, but its results were unfortunate. Gracie impulsively seized and kissed the hand with enthusiasm. "All right, Avery dear," she said with pointed docility.

Mr. Lorimer's brows rose a little higher, but being momentarily at a loss for a suitable comment, he contented himself with a return to Avery's correspondence.

"The other letter," he said, "bears the well-known crest of the Evesham family. Ah, Mrs. Denys!" he shook his head at her. "Now, what does that portend?"

"What is the crest?" asked Avery, briskly cutting another slice.

"The devil," said Gracie.

"My dear!" remonstrated Mrs. Lorimer, with a nervous glance towards her husband.

The Reverend Stephen was smiling, but in a fashion she did not quite like. He addressed Avery.

"The Evesham crest, Mrs. Denys, is a gentleman with horns and hoofs and under him the one expressive word, '*Cave.*' Excellent advice, is it not? I think we should do well to follow it." He turned the envelope over, and studied the address. "What a curious style of writing the young man has, unrestrained to a degree! This looks as if it had been written in a desperate mood. Mrs. Denys, Mrs. Denys, what have you been doing?"

He began to laugh, but stopped abruptly as Julian, who was seated near him, with a sudden, clumsy movement, upset a stream of cocoa across the breakfast-table. This created an instant diversion. Mr. Lorimer turned upon him vindictively, and soundly smacked his head, Mrs. Lorimer covered her face and wept, and Avery, with Gracie close behind, hurried to remedy the disaster.

Ronald came to help her in his quiet, gentlemanly way, dabbing up the thick brown stream with his table-napkin. Pat slipped round to his mother and hugged her hard. And Olive, the only unmoved member of the party, looked on

with contemptuous eyes the while she continued her breakfast. Jeanie still breakfasted upstairs in the schoolroom, and so missed the *fracas*.

"The place is a pig-sty!" declared Mr. Lorimer, roused out of all complacence and casting dainty phraseology to the winds. "And you, sir"—he addressed his second son—"wholly unfit for civilized society. Go upstairs, and—if you have any appetite left after this disgusting exhibition—satisfy it in the nursery!"

Julian, crimson but wholly unashamed, flung up his head defiantly and walked to the door.

"Stop!" commanded Mr. Lorimer, ere he reached it.

Julian stopped.

His father looked him up and down with gradually returning composure. "You will not go to the nursery," he said. "You will go to the study and there suffer the penalty for insolence."

"Stephen!" broke from Mrs. Lorimer in anguished protest.

"A beastly shame!" cried Gracie vehemently, flinging discretion to the winds; she adored her brother Julian. "He never spoke a single word!"

"Go, Julian!" said Mr. Lorimer.

Julian went, banging the door vigorously behind him.

Then, amid an awful silence, the Vicar turned his scrutiny upon his small daughter.

Gracie stood up under it with all the courage at her disposal, but she was white to the lips before that dreadful gaze passed from her to Avery.

"Mrs. Denys," said Mr. Lorimer, in tones of icy courtesy, "will you oblige me by taking that child upstairs, undressing her, and putting her to bed? She will remain there until I come!"

Avery, her task accomplished, turned and faced him. She was as white as Gracie, but there was a steadfast light in her eyes that showed her wholly unafraid.

"Mr. Lorimer," she said, "with your permission I will deal with Gracie. She has done wrong, I know. By and by, she will be sorry and tell you so."

Mr. Lorimer smiled sarcastically. "An apology, my dear Mrs. Denys, does not condone the offence. It is wholly against my principles to spare the rod when it is so richly

merited, and I shall not do so on this occasion. Will you kindly do as I have requested?"

It was final, and Avery knew it. Mrs. Lorimer knew it also, and burst into hysterical crying.

Avery turned swiftly. "Go upstairs, dear!" she said to Gracie, and Gracie went like an arrow.

Mrs. Lorimer started to her feet. "Stephen! Stephen!" she cried imploringly.

But her husband turned a deaf ear. With a contemptuous gesture he tossed Avery's letters upon the table and stalked from the room.

Mrs. Lorimer uttered a wild cry of despair, and fell back fainting in her chair.

For the next quarter of an hour Avery was fully occupied in restoring her, again assisted by Ronald. When she came to herself, it was only to shed anguished tears on Avery's shoulder and repeat over and over again that she could not bear it, she could not bear it.

Avery was of the same opinion, but she did not say so. She strove instead with the utmost tenderness to persuade her to drink some tea. But even when she had succeeded in this, Mrs. Lorimer continued to be so exhausted and upset that at last, growing uneasy, Avery despatched Ronald for the doctor.

She sent Olive for the children's nurse and took counsel with her as to getting her mistress back to bed. But nurse instantly discouraged this suggestion.

"For the Lord's sake, ma'am, don't take her upstairs!" she said. "The master's up there with Miss Gracie, and he's whipping the poor lamb something cruel. He made me undress her first."

"Oh, I cannot have that!" exclaimed Avery. "Stay here a minute, Nurse, while I go up!"

She rushed upstairs in furious anger to the room in which the three little girls slept. The door was locked, but the sounds within were unmistakable. Gracie was plainly receiving severe punishment from her irate parent. Her agonized crying tore Avery's heart.

She threw herself at the door and battered at it with her fists. "Mr. Lorimer!" she called. "Mr. Lorimer, let me in!"

There was no response. Possibly she was not even heard,

for the dreadful crying continued and, mingled with it, the swish of the slender little riding-switch which in the earlier, less harassed days of his married life the Reverend Stephen had kept for the horse he rode, and which now he kept for his children.

They were terrible moments for Avery that she spent outside that locked door, listening impotently to a child's piteous cries for mercy from one who knew it not. But they came to an end at last. Gracie's distress sank into anguished sobs, and she knew that the punishment was over. Mr. Lorimer had satisfied both his sense of duty and his malice.

She heard him speak in cold, cutting tones. "I have punished you more severely than I had ever expected to find necessary, and I hope that the lesson will be sufficient. But I warn you, Grace, most solemnly that I shall watch your behaviour very closely for the future, and if I detect in you the smallest indication of the insolence and defiance for which I have inflicted this punishment upon you to-day I shall repeat the punishment fourfold. No! Not another word!" as Gracie made some inarticulate utterance, "or you will compel me to repeat it to-night!"

And with that, he walked quietly to the door and unlocked it.

Avery had ceased to beat upon it; she met him, white and stiff, in the doorway.

"I have just sent for the doctor," she said. "Mrs. Lorimer has been taken ill."

She passed him at once with the words, not looking at him, for she could not trust herself. Straight to Gracie, huddled on the floor in her night-dress, she went, and lifted the child bodily to her bed.

Gracie clung to her, sobbing passionately. Mr. Lorimer lingered in the doorway.

"Will you go, please?" said Avery, tight-lipped and rigid, the child clasped to her throbbing heart.

It was a definite command, spoken in a tone that almost compelled compliance, and Mr. Lorimer lingered no more.

Then for one long minute Avery sat and rocked the poor little tortured body in her arms.

At length, through Gracie's sobs, she spoke. "Gracie darling, I'm going to ask you to do something big for me."

"Yes?" sobbed Gracie, clinging tightly round her neck.

"Leave off crying!" Avery said. "Please leave off crying, darling, and be your own brave self!"

"I can't," cried Gracie.

"But do try, darling!" Avery urged her softly. "Because, you see, I can't leave you like this, and your poor little mother wants me so badly. She is ill, Gracie, and I ought to go to her, but I can't while you are crying so."

Thus adjured, Gracie made gallant efforts to check herself. But her spirit was temporarily quite broken. She stood passively with the tears running down her face while Avery hastily dressed her again, and set her rumpled hair to rights. Then again for a few seconds they held each other very tightly.

"Bless you, my own brave darling!" Avery whispered.

To which Gracie made tearful reply: "Whatever should we do without you, dear—dear Avery?"

"And you won't cry any more?" pleaded Avery, who was nearer to tears herself than she dared have owned.

"No," said Gracie valiantly.

She began to dry her eyes with vigour—a hopeful sign; and after pressing upon Avery another damp kiss was even able to muster a smile.

"Now you can do something to help me," said Avery. "Give yourself five minutes—here's my watch to go by!" She slipped it off her own wrist and on to Gracie's. "Then run up to the nursery and see after the children while nurse is downstairs! And drink a cup of milk, dearie! Mind you do, for you've had nothing yet."

"I shall love to wear your watch," murmured Gracie, beginning to be comforted.

"I know you'll take care of it," Avery said, with a loving hand on the child's hair. "Now you'll be all right, will you? I can leave you without worrying?"

Gracie gave her face a final polish, and nodded. Spent and sore though she was, her spirit was beginning to revive. "Is mother really ill?" she asked, as Avery turned to go.

"I don't know, dear. I'm rather anxious about her," said Avery.

"It's all Father's fault," said Gracie.

Avery was silent. She could not contradict the statement. As she reached the door, Gracie spoke again, but more

to herself than to Avery. "I hope—when he dies—he'll go to hell and stay there for ever and ever and ever!"

"Oh, Gracie!" Avery stopped, genuinely shocked. "How wrong!" she said.

Gracie nodded several times. "Yes, I know it's wrong, but I don't care. And I hope he'll die to-morrow."

"Hush! Hush!" Avery said.

Whereat Gracie broke into a propitiatory smile. "The things I wish for never happen," she said.

And Avery departed, wondering if this statement deserved to be treated in the light of an amendment.

CHAPTER XIX

THE DAY OF TROUBLE

LENNOX TUDOR spent hours at the Vicarage that day in close attendance upon Mrs. Lorimer in company with Avery, who scarcely left her side. Terrible hours they were, during which they battled strenuously to keep the poor, quivering life in her weary body.

"There is no reason why she shouldn't pull round," Tudor assured Avery.

But yet throughout the day she hovered on the verge of collapse.

By night the worst danger was over, but intense weakness remained. She lay white and still, taking notice of nothing. Only once, when Avery was giving her nourishment, did she rouse herself to speak.

"Beg my husband not to be vexed with me!" she whispered. "Tell him there won't be another little one after all! He'll be glad to know that."

And Avery, cut to the heart, promised to deliver the message.

A little later she stole away, leaving the children's nurse in charge, and slipped up to the schoolroom for some tea. Tudor had gone to see another patient, but had promised to return as soon as possible.

The children were all gathered round the table where Olive very capably presided. Gracie, looking [illegible] and

subdued, sat on the end of Jeanie's sofa; but she sprang to meet Avery the moment she appeared.

Avery sat down, holding the child's hand in hers. She glanced round the table as she did so.

"Where is Julian?"

"Upstairs," said Ronald briefly. "In disgrace."

Avery felt her heart contract with a sick sense of further trouble in the air. "Has he been there all day?" she asked.

Ronald nodded. "And another flogging to-night if he doesn't apologize. He says he'll die first."

"So would I," breathed Gracie.

At this juncture the door swung open with stately precision, and Mr. Lorimer entered. Everyone rose, according to established custom, with the exceptions of Avery and Jeanie. Gracie's fingers tightened convulsively upon Avery's hand, and she turned as white as the tablecloth.

Mr. Lorimer, however, looked over her head as if she did not exist, and addressed Avery.

"Mrs. Denys, be so good as to spare me two minutes in the study!" he said with extreme formality.

"Certainly," Avery made quiet reply. "I will come to you before I go back to Mrs. Lorimer."

He raised his brows slightly, as if he had expected a more prompt compliance with his request. And then his eyes fell upon Gracie, clinging fast to Avery's hand.

"Grace," he said, in his clear, definite tones, "come here!"

The child gave a great start and shrank against Avery's shoulder. "Oh, no!" she whispered. "No!"

"Come here!" repeated Mr. Lorimer.

He extended his hand, but Gracie only shrank further away. She was trembling violently, so violently that Avery felt impelled to pass a sustaining arm around her.

"Come, my child!" said the Vicar, the majestic composure of his features gradually yielding to a look of dawning severity.

"Go, dear!" whispered Avery.

"I don't want to," gasped Gracie.

"I shall not punish you," her father said, "unless I find you disobedient or still unrepentant."

"Darling, go!" Avery urged softly into her ear. "It'll be all right now."

But Gracie, shaking from head to foot and scarcely able to stand, only clung to her the faster, and in a moment she began agitatedly to cry.

Mr. Lorimer's hand fell to his side. "Still unrepentant, I fear," he said.

Avery, with the child gathered closely to her, looked across at him with wide, accusing eyes.

"She is frightened and upset," she said. "It is not fair to judge her in this condition."

Mr. Lorimer's eyes gleamed back malignantly. He made her an icy bow. "In that case, Mrs. Denys," he said, "she had better go to bed and stay there until her condition has improved."

Avery compressed her lips tightly, and made no rejoinder. The Reverend Stephen compressed his, and after a definite pause of most unpleasant tension, he uttered a deep sigh and withdrew.

"I know he means to do it again!" sobbed Gracie. "I know he does!"

"He shall not!" said Avery.

And with the words she put the child from her, rose, and with great determination walked out of the room.

Mr. Lorimer had scarcely settled himself in what he called his "chair of ease" in the study when her low knock reached him, and she entered. Her grey eyes were no longer angry, but very resolute. She closed the door softly, and came straight to the fire.

"Mr. Lorimer," she said, her voice pitched very low, "I want you to be patient with me just for a minute. Will you?"

Mr. Lorimer sighed again. "I am yearning for the refreshment of a little solitary meditation, Mrs. Denys," he said.

"I shall not keep you," Avery rejoined steadily. She stood before him, very pale but wholly composed. "What I have to say can be said in a very few seconds. First, with regard to Gracie; the child is so upset that I think any further punishment would make her downright ill."

"Pooh, my dear Mrs. Denys!" said the Reverend Stephen.

Avery paused a moment. "Will you try to listen to me with an open mind?" she said.

"I am listening," said Mr. Lorimer.

"I know she was naughty this morning," Avery continued. "I am not trying to defend her behaviour. But her punishment was a very severe one, and it has so terrified her that at present she can think of nothing else. Give her time to be sorry! Please give her time!"

Mr. Lorimer glanced at the clock. "She has already had nine hours," he observed. "I shall give her three more."

"And then?" said Avery.

His eyes travelled up to her troubled face. "And if by then," he said deliberately, "she has not come to me to express her penitence, I shall be reluctantly compelled to repeat the punishment."

"You will drive the child out of her senses if you do!" Avery exclaimed.

He shrugged his shoulders. "My dear Mrs. Denys, permit me to remind you that I have had considerable experience in the upbringing of children."

"And they are all afraid of you," Avery said.

He smiled. "In my opinion a little wholesome awe is salutary. No, Mrs. Denys, I cannot listen any further to your persuasion. In fact, I fear that in Grace's case I have so far erred on the side of laxness. She has become very wild and uncontrolled, and—she must be tamed."

He closed his lips upon the word, and despair entered Avery's heart. She gripped her self-control with all her might, realizing that the moment she lost it her strength would be gone.

With a great effort she turned from the subject. "I have a message for you from Mrs. Lorimer," she said, after a moment, and proceeded to deliver it in a low, steady voice, her eyes upon the fire.

The man in the chair heard it without the movement of a muscle of his face. "I will endeavour to look in upon her presently," was all the reply he made.

Avery turned to go, but he stopped her with a gesture. "Mrs. Denys," he said smoothly, "you forget, I think, that I also had something to say."

Avery paused. She had forgotten.

He turned his eyes deliberately up to hers, as he leaned back in his chair. "I am sorry to have to tell you," he said, "that in consequence of your unfortunate zeal in

encouraging the children in insubordination, I can no longer look upon you as in any sense a help in my household. I therefore desire that you will take a month's notice from now. If I can fill your place sooner, I shall dispense with your services earlier."

Calmly, dispassionately, he uttered the words. Avery stood quite still to hear them. And through her like a stab there ran the thought of the poor little woman upstairs. The pain of it was almost unbearable. She caught her breath involuntarily.

But the next moment she was herself again. She bowed without a word, and turned to go.

She had nearly reached the door ere she discovered that it stood open, and that Lennox Tudor was on the threshold, more grimly strong than she had ever before realized him to be.

He stood back for her to pass, holding the door for her without speaking. And in silence Avery departed.

CHAPTER XX

THE STRAIGHT TRUTH

"AH, my worthy physician, enter, enter!" was Mr. Lorimer's bland greeting. "What news of the patient?"

Tudor tramped up to the hearth, looking very square and resolute. "I've come from the schoolroom," he said, "where I went to take a look at Jeanie. But I found Gracie required more of my attention than she did. Are you absolutely mad, I wonder, to inflict corporal punishment upon a highly-strung child like that? Let me tell you this! You'll turn her into a senseless idiot if you persist! The child is nearly crazed with terror as it is. I've told them to put her to bed, and I'm going up to give her a soothing draught directly."

Mr. Lorimer rose with dignity. "You somewhat magnify your office, Doctor," he said.

"No, I don't!" said Tudor rudely. "I do what I must. And I warn you that child is wrought up to a highly dangerous pitch of excitement. You don't want her to have brain-fever, I suppose?"

"Pooh!" said Mr. Lorimer.

Tudor stamped a furious foot, and let himself go. He had no scruples about losing his temper at that moment. He poured forth his indignation in a perfect tornado of righteous anger.

"That's all you have to say, is it? You—a man of God, so-called—killing your wife by inches and not caring a damn what suffering you cause! I tell you, she has been at death's door all day, thanks to your infernal behaviour. She may die yet, and you will be directly responsible. You've crushed her systematically, body and soul. As to the children, if you touch that little girl again—or any of 'em—I'll haul you before the Bench for cruelty. Do you hear that?"

Mr. Lorimer, who had been waving a protesting hand throughout this vigorous denunciation, here interposed a lofty: "Sir! You forget yourself!"

"Not I!" flung back Tudor. "I know very well what I'm about. I spoke to you once before about your wife, and you wouldn't listen. But—by Heaven—you shall listen this time, and hear the straight truth for once! Her life has been a perpetual martyrdom for years. You've tortured her through the children as cruelly as any victim was ever tortured on the rack. But it's got to stop now. I don't deal in empty threats. What I've said I shall stick to. You may be the Vicar of the parish, but you're under the same law as the poorest of 'em. And if anything more of this kind happens, you shall feel the law. And a pretty scandal it'll make."

He paused a moment, but Mr. Lorimer stood in frozen silence; and almost immediately he plunged on.

"Now as regards Mrs. Denys; I heard you give her notice just now. That must be taken back—if she will consent to stay. For Mrs. Lorimer literally can't do without her yet. Mrs. Lorimer will be an invalid for some time to come, if not for good and all. And who is going to take charge of the house if you kick out the only capable person it contains? Who is going to look after your precious comfort, not to mention that of your wife and children? I tell you, Mrs. Denys is absolutely indispensable to you all for the present. If you part with her, you part with every shred of ease and domestic peace you have. And you will have to keep a properly qualified nurse to look after your

wife. And it isn't every nurse that is a blessing in the home, I can assure you."

He stopped again, and finding Mr. Lorimer still somewhat dazed by this sudden attack, he turned and began to pace the room to give him time to recover.

There followed a prolonged silence. Then at last, with a deep sigh, the Vicar dropped down again in his chair.

"My good Doctor," he said, "I am convinced that your motives are good, though your language be somewhat lacking in restraint. I am sorely perplexed; let me admit it! Mrs. Denys is, I believe, a thoroughly efficient housekeeper, but"—he paused impressively—"her presence is a disturbing element with which I would gladly dispense. She is continually inventing some pretext for presenting herself at the study-door. Moreover, she is extremely injudicious with the children, and I am bound to think of their spiritual welfare before their mere bodily needs."

He was evidently anxious to avoid an open rupture, so perhaps it was as well that he did not see the look on Tudor's face as he listened to this harangue.

"Why don't you pack them off to school?" said Tudor, sticking to the point with commendable resolution. "Peace in the house is absolutely essential t. Mrs. Lorimer. All the elder ones would be better out o' —with the exception of Jeanie."

"And why with the exception of Jeanie, may I ask?" There was a touch of asperity in Mr. Lorimer's voice. He had been badly browbeaten, and—for some reason—he had had to submit. But he was in no docile mood thereafter.

Tudor heard the note of resentment in his tone, and came back to the hearth. "I have been awaiting a suitable opportunity to talk to you about Jeanie," he said.

"What next? What next?" said Mr. Lorimer fretfully.

Tudor proceeded to tell him, his tone deliberately unsympathetic. "She needs most careful treatment, most vigilant watching. There is a weakness of the lungs which might develop at any time. Mrs. Denys understands her and can take care of her. But she is in no state to be entrusted to strangers."

"Why was this not mentioned to me before?" said Mr. Lorimer querulously. "Though the head of the house, I am always the last to be told of anything of importance. I suppose you are sure of what you say?"

"Quite sure," said Tudor, "though I should be absolutely willing for you to have another opinion at any time. As to not telling you, I have always found it difficult to get you to listen, and I have no time to waste on persuasion as a rule." He looked at the clock. "I ought to be going now. You will consider what I have said about sending the other children away to school? You'll find it's the only thing to do."

Mr. Lorimer sighed again with deep melancholy.

Tudor squared his shoulders aggressively. "And with your permission, I'll tell Mrs. Denys that you have reconsidered the matter and hope she will remain for a time at least, if she can see her way to do so."

He paused very definitely for a reply to this. Mr. Lorimer's mouth was drawn down at the corners, but he looked into the fire with the aloofness of a mind not occupied with mundane things.

Tudor faced him and waited with grim resolution; but several seconds passed ere his attitude seemed to become apparent to the abstracted Vicar. Then with extreme deliberation his eyelids were raised.

"Excuse me, Doctor! My thoughts were for the moment elsewhere. Yes, you have my permission to tell her that. And—I agree with you. It seems advisable to remove the elder children from her influence without delay. I shall therefore take steps to do so."

Tudor nodded with a shrug of the shoulders. It did not matter to him in what garb his advice was dressed, so long as it was followed.

"Very well," he said. "I am now going to settle Gracie, and I shall tell her you have issued a free pardon all round, and no more will be said to anyone. I was told one of the boys was in hot water too, but you can let him off for once. You're much more likely to make him ashamed of himself that way."

Mr. Lorimer resumed his contemplation of the fire without speaking.

Tudor turned to go. He was fairly satisfied that he had established peace for the time being, and he was not ill-pleased with his success.

He told himself as he departed that he had discovered how to deal with the Reverend Stephen. It had never occurred to him to attempt such treatment before.

To Avery later he gave but few details of the interview, but she could not fail to see his grim elation and smiled at it.

"I am to stay, then, am I?" she said.

"If you will graciously consent to do so," said Tudor, with his brief smile.

"I couldn't do anything else," she said.

"I'm glad of that," he said abruptly, "for my own sake." And with that, very suddenly he turned the subject.

CHAPTER XXI

THE ENCHANTED LAND

AT ten o'clock that night, Avery went round to bid each child good night. She found Gracie sleeping peacefully with her bed pushed close to Jeanie's. The latter was awake and whispered a greeting. On the other side of the room Olive slept the sleep of the just. Avery did not pause by her bed, but went straight to Jeanie, who held her hand for a little and then gently begged her to go to bed herself.

"You must be so tired," she said.

Avery could not deny the fact. But she had arranged to sleep in Mrs. Lorimer's room, so she could not look forward to a night without cars. She did not tell Jeanie this, however, but presently kissed her tenderly and stole away.

She visited the younger boys, and found them all asleep; then slipped up to the attic in which the elder lads slept.

She heard their voices as she reached the closed door. She knocked softly, therefore, and in a moment heard one of them leap to open.

It was Ronald, clad in pyjamas, but unfailingly courteous, who invited her to enter.

"I knew it must be you, Mrs. Denys. Come in! Very pleased to see you. Wait a second while I light a candle!"

He did so, and revealed Julian sitting up in bed with sullen defiance writ large upon his face. But he smiled at sight of her, and patted the side of his bed invitingly.

"Don't sit on the chair! It's untrustworthy. It's awfully decent of you to look us up like this—that is, if you haven't come to preach."

"I haven't," said Avery, accepting the invitation since she felt too weary to stand.

Julian nodded approval. "That's right. I knew you were too much of a brick. I'm awaiting my next swishing for upsetting my cup at breakfast in your defence, so I hardly think I deserve any pi-jaw from you, do I?"

"Oh, I'm not at all pi, I assure you," Avery said. "And if it was done for my sake, I'm quite grateful, though I wish you hadn't."

Julian grinned at her, and she proceeded.

"I don't think you need wait any longer for the swishing. Your father has decided, I understand, not to carry the matter any further."

Julian opened his eyes wide. "What? You've been at him, have you?"

Avery smiled even while she sighed.

"Oh, I'm no good, Julian. I only make things worse when I interfere. No, it's not due to me. But, all the same, I hope and believe the trouble has blown over for the present. Do—do try and keep the peace in the future!"

Her weariness sounded in her voice; it quivered in spite of her.

Julian placed a quick, clammy hand on hers and squeezed it affectionately.

"Anything to oblige!" he promised generously. "Here, Ron! Shy over those letters! She wants something to cheer her up."

"Letters!" Avery looked round sharply. "I had forgotten my letters!" she said.

"Here they are!" Ronald came forward and placed them in her hand. "I picked 'em up this morning, and then when you sent me off for the doc., I forgot all about 'em. I'm sorry. I only came across them when I was undressing, and you were busy in the mater's room, so I thought I'd keep them safe till to-morrow. I hope they are not important," he added.

"I don't suppose so," said Avery; yet her heart jerked oddly as she slipped them into her dress. "Thank you for taking care of them. I must be going now. You are going to be good?"

She looked at Julian, who, still feeling generous, thrust a rough, boyish arm about her neck and kissed her.

"You're a trump!" he said. "There! Good night! I'll be as meek as Moses in the morning."

It was a definite promise, and Avery felt relieved. She took leave of Ronald more ceremoniously. His scrupulous politeness demanded it. And then with feet that felt strangely light, considering her fatigue, she ran softly down again to Mrs. Lorimer's room.

In the dressing-room adjoining she opened and read her letters. One of them—the one with the Australian stamp, characteristically brief but kind—was to tell her that the writer, a friend of some standing, was coming to England, and hoped to see her again ere long.

The other, bearing the sinister Evesham crest, lay on the table unopened till she was undressed and ready to join Mrs. Lorimer. Then—for the first time in all that weary day of turmoil—Avery stole a few moments of luxury.

She sat down and opened Piers' letter.

It began impetuously, without preliminary. "I wonder whether you have any idea what it costs to clear out without a word of farewell. Perhaps you are even thinking that I've forgotten. Or perhaps it matters so little to you that you haven't thought at all. I know you won't tell me, so it's not much good speculating. But lest you should misunderstand in any way, I want to explain that I haven't been fit to come near you since we parted on Christmas Eve. You were angry with me then, weren't you? Avery in a temper! Do you remember how it went? At least you meant to be, but somehow you didn't get up the steam. You wished me a happy Christmas instead, and I ought to have had one in consequence. But I didn't. I played the giddy goat off and on all day long, and my grandfather—dear old chap—thought what a merry infant I was. But—you've heard of the worm that dieth not and the fire that is not quenched? The Reverend Stephen has taken care of that. Do you remember his 'penny-dreadful' of a Sunday or two ago? You were very angry about it, Avery, I love you when you're angry. And how he dilated on the gates of brass and the bars of iron and the outer darkness, etc., etc., till we all went home and shivered in our beds? Well, that's the sort of place I spent my Christmas in, and I wanted to come to you and Jeanie and be made happy, but—I couldn't. I was too fast in prison. I felt too murderous.

I hunted all the next day to try and get more wholesome. But it was no good. I was seeing red all the time. And at night something happened that touched me off like an exploded train of gunpowder. Has Tudor told you about it yet? Doubtless he will. I tried to murder him, and succeeded in cracking his eyeglass. Banal, wasn't it? And I have an uneasy feeling that he came out top-dog after all, confound him!

"Avery, whoever else you have no use for, I know you're not in love with him, and in my saner moments I realise that you never could be. But I wasn't sane just then. I love you so! I love you so! It's good to be able to get it right out before you have time to stop me. For I worship you, Avery, my darling! You don't realise it. How should you? You think it is just the passing fancy of a boy. A boy—ye gods!

"I think of you hour by hour. You are always close in your own secret place in my heart. I hold you in my arms when no one else is near. I kiss your forehead, your eyes, your hair. No, not your lips, dear, even in fancy. I have never in my maddest dreams kissed your lips. But I ache and crave and long for them, though—till you give me leave—I dare not even pretend that they are mine. Will you ever give me leave? You say 'No' now. Yet I think you will, Avery. I think you will. I have known ever since that first moment when you held me back from slaying poor old Caesar that I have met my Fate, and because I know it I'm trying—for your sweet sake—to make myself a better man. It's beastly uphill work, and that episode with Tudor has pulled me back. Confound him! By the way, though, it's done me good in one sense, for I find I don't detest him quite so hideously as I did. The man has his points.

"And now, Avery—dear Avery, will you forgive me for writing all this? I know you won't write to me, but I send my address in case! And I shall watch every mail day after day, night after night, for the letter that will never come.

"Pathetic picture, isn't it? Good-bye!

"PIERS.

"My love to the queen of all good fairies, and tell Pixie that I hope the gloves fitted."

Avery's lips parted in a smile; a soft flush overspread

her face. That costly gift from the children—she had guessed from the beginning whence it came.

And then slowly, even with reverence, she folded the letter up, and rose. Her smile became a little tremulous. It had been a day of many troubles, and she was very tired. The boy's adoration was strangely sweet to her wearied senses. She felt subtly softened and tender towards him.

No, it must not be! It could not be! He must forget her. She would write to-morrow and tell him so.

Yet for that one night the charm held her. She viewed from afar an enchanted land—a land of sunshine and singing birds—a land where it was always spring. It was a country she had seen before, but only in her dreams. Her feet had never wandered there. The path she had followed had not led to it. Perhaps it was all a mirage. Perhaps there was no path.

Yet in her dreams she crossed the boundary, and entered the forbidden land.

CHAPTER XXII

THE COMING OF A FRIEND

"ETERNAL sunshine!" said Piers, with a grimace at the deep, deep blue of the slumbering water that stretched below him to the horizon. "And at night eternal moonshine. Romantic but monotonous. I wonder if the post is in."

He cast an irresolute glance up the path behind him, but decided to remain where he was. He had looked so many times in vain.

There were a good many people in the hotel, but he was not feeling sociable. The night before he had dropped a considerable sum at the "Casino," but it had not greatly interested him. Regretfully he had come to the conclusion that gambling in that form did not attract him. The greedy crowd that pushed and strove in the heated rooms, he regarded as downright revolting. He himself had been robbed with astonishing audacity by a lady with painted eyes who had snatched his only winnings before he could reach them. It was a small episode, and he had let it pass,

but it had not rendered the tables more attractive. He had, in fact, left them in utter disgust.

Altogether he was feeling decidedly out of tune with his surroundings that morning, and the beauty of the scene irritated rather than soothed him. In the garden, a short distance from him, a voluble French party were chattering with great animation and a good deal of cackling laughter. He wondered what on earth they found to amuse them so persistently. He also wondered if a swim in that faultless blue would do anything to improve his temper, and decided with another wry grimace that it was hardly worth while to try.

It was at this point that there fell a step on the winding path below him that led down amongst shrubs to the sea. The top of a Panama hat caught Piers' attention. He watched it idly as it ascended, speculating without much interest as to the face beneath it. It mounted with the utmost steadiness, neither hastening nor lingering. There was something about its unvarying progress that struck Piers as British. His interest increased at once. He suddenly discovered that he wanted someone British to talk to, forgetting the fact that he had fled but ten minutes before from the boring society of an Anglo-Indian colonel.

The man in the Panama came nearer. Piers from above began to have a glimpse of a tweed coat and a strong brown hand that swung in time to the steady stride. The path curved immediately below him, and the last few yards of it led directly to the spot on which he stood. As the stranger rounded the curve he came into full view.

He was a big man, broadly built and powerful. His whole personality was suggestive of squareness. And yet to Piers' critical eyes he did not look wholly British. His gait was that of a man accustomed to long hours in the saddle. Under the turned-down Panama the square, determined chin showed massively. It was a chin that obviously required constant shaving.

Quietly the man drew near. He did not see Piers under his lowered hat-brim till he was within a few feet of him. Then, becoming suddenly aware of him, he raised his eyes. A moment later his hand went up in a brief, friendly salute.

Piers' hand made instant response. "Splendid morning!" he began to say—and stopped with the words half

uttered. The blood surged up to his forehead in a great wave. "Good heavens!" he said instead.

The other man paused. He did not look at Piers very narrowly, but merely glanced towards him, and then turned his eyes towards the wonderful, far-stretching blue below them.

"Yes, splendid," he said quietly. "Worth remembering—a scene like this."

His tone was absolutely impersonal. He stood beside Piers for a moment or two, gazing forth into the infinite distance; then with a slight gesture of leave-taking, he turned as if to continue his progress.

In that instant, however, Piers recovered himself sufficiently to speak. His face was still deeply flushed, but his voice was steady enough as he turned fully and addressed the new-comer.

"Don't you know me? We have met before."

The other man stopped at once. He held out his hand. "Yes, of course I know you—knew you the moment I set eyes on you. But I wasn't sure that you would care to be recognised by me."

"What on earth do you take me for?" said Piers bluntly.

He gripped the hand hard, looking straight into the calm eyes with a curious sense of being sustained thereby. "I believe," he said, with an odd impulse of impetuosity, "that you are the one man in the world that I couldn't be other than pleased to see."

The elder man smiled. "That's very kind of you," he said.

He had the slow speech of one accustomed to solitude. He kept Piers' hand in his in a warm, firm grip. "I have often thought about you," he said. "You know, I never heard your name."

"My name is Evesham," said Piers, with the quick, gracious manner habitual to him. "Piers Evesham."

"Thank you. Mine is Edmund Crowther. Odd that we should meet like this!"

"A piece of luck I didn't expect!" said Piers boyishly. "Have you only just arrived?"

"I came here last night from Marseilles." Crowther's eyes rested on the smiling face with its proud, patrician features with the look of a man examining a perfect bronze.

"It's very kind of you to welcome me like this," he said. "I was feeling a stranger in a strange land as I came up that path."

"I've been watching you," said Piers. "I liked the business-like way you tackled it. It was British."

Crowther smiled. "I suppose it has become second nature with me to put business first," he said.

"Wish I could say the same," said Piers; and then, with his hand on the other man's arm: "Come and have a drink! You are staying for some time, I hope?"

"No, not for long," said Crowther. "It was yielding to temptation to come here at all."

"Are you alone?" asked Piers.

"Quite alone."

"Then there's no occasion to hurry," said Piers. "You stay here for a bit, and kill time with me."

"I never kill time," said Crowther deliberately. "It's too scarce a commodity."

"It is when you're happy," said Piers.

Crowther looked at him with a question in his eyes that he did not put into words, and in answer to which Piers laughed a reckless laugh.

They were walking side by side up the hotel garden, and each successive group of visitors that they passed turned to stare. For both men were in a fashion remarkable. The massive strength of the elder, with his square, dogged face and purposeful stride; the lithe, muscular power of the younger, with his superb carriage and haughty nobility of feature, formed a contrast as complete as it was arresting.

They ascended the steps that led up to the terrace, and here Piers paused. "You sit down here while I go and order drinks! Here's a comfortable seat, and here's an English paper!"

He thrust it into Crowther's hand and departed with a careless whistle on his lips. But Crowther did not look at the paper. His eyes followed Piers as long as he was in sight, and then turned contemplatively towards the sea with that look in them as of one who watches from afar. After a little he took his hat off and suffered the morning breeze to blow across his forehead. He had the serene brow of a child, though the hair above it was broadly streaked with grey.

He was still sitting thus when there came the sound of jerky footsteps on the terrace behind him, and an irascible voice addressed him with scarcely concealed impatience.

"Excuse me! I saw you talking to my grandson just now. Do you know where the young fool is gone to?"

Crowther turned in his solid, imperturbable fashion, looked at the speaker, and got to his feet.

"Yes," he said, with a smile. "He has gone to procure drinks in my honour. He and I are—old friends."

"Oh!" said Sir Beverley, and looked him up and down in a fashion which another man might have found offensive. "And who may you be?"

"My name is Crowther," said the other with simplicity.

Sir Beverley grunted. "That doesn't tell me much. Never heard of you before."

"I daresay not." Crowther was quite unmoved; there was even a hint of humour in his tone. "Your grandson is probably a man of many friends."

"Why should you say that?" demanded Sir Beverley suspiciously.

"Won't you sit down?" said Crowther.

Sir Beverley hesitated a moment, then abruptly complied with the suggestion. Crowther followed his example, and they faced one another across the little table.

"I say it," said Crowther, "because that is the sort of lad I take him to be."

Sir Beverley grunted again. "And when and where did you make his acquaintance?" he inquired, with a stern, unsparing scrutiny of the calm face opposite.

"We met in Australia," said Crowther. "It must be six years or more ago."

"Australia's a big place," observed Sir Beverley.

Crowther's slow smile appeared. "Yes, sir, it is. It's so mighty big that it makes all the other places of the world seem small. Have you ever been in Queensland—ever seen a sheep-farm?"

"No, I've never been in Queensland," snapped Sir Beverley. "But as to sheep farms, I've got one of my own."

"How many acres?" asked Crowther.

"Oh, don't ask me! Piers will tell you. Piers knows. Where the devil is the boy? Why doesn't he come?"

"Here, sir, here!" cried Piers, coming up behind him.

"I see you have made the acquaintance of my friend Crowther, let me present you to my grandfather, Sir Beverley Evesham! I've just been to look for you," he added to the latter. "But Victor told me you had gone out, and then I spied you out of the window."

"I told you I was coming out, didn't I?" growled Sir Beverley. "So this is a friend of yours, is it? How is it I've never heard of him before?"

"We lost sight of each other," explained Piers, pulling forward a chair between them and dropping into it. "But that state of affairs is not going to happen again. How long are you over for, Crowther?"

"Possibly a year, possibly more." Again Crowther's eyes were upon him, critical but kindly.

"Going to spend your time in England?" asked Piers.

Crowther nodded. "Most of it, yes."

"Good!" said Piers with satisfaction. "We shall see plenty of you, then."

"But I am going to be busy," said Crowther, with a smile.

"Of course you are. You can come down and teach me how to make the Home Farm a success," laughed Piers.

"I shall be very pleased to try," said Crowther, "though"—he turned towards Sir Beverley—"I expect you, sir, know as much on that subject as either of us."

Sir Beverley's eyes were upon him with searching directness. He seemed to be trying to discover a reason for his boy's obvious pleasure in his unexpected meeting with this man who must have been nearly twice his age.

"I've never done much in the farming line," he said briefly, in answer to Crowther's observation. "It's been more of a pastime with me than anything else. It's the same with Piers here. He's only putting in time with it till the constituency falls vacant."

"I see," said Crowther; adding with his quiet smile: "There seems to be plenty of time, anyhow, in the old country, whatever else she may be short of."

Piers laughed as he lifted his glass. "Time for everything but work, Crowther. She has developed beastly loose morals in her old age. Some day there'll come a nasty bust-up, and she may pull herself together and do things again, or she may go to pieces. I wonder which?"

"I don't," said Crowther.

"You don't?" Piers paused, glass in hand, looking at him expectantly.

"No, I don't." Crowther also raised his glass; he looked Piers straight in the eyes. "Here's to the boys of England, Piers!" he said. "They'll see to it that she comes through."

Sir Beverley also drank, but with a distasteful air. "You've a higher opinion of the young fools than I have," he remarked.

"I've made a study of the breed, sir," said Crowther.

The conversation drifted to indifferent matters, but Piers' interest remained keen. It seemed that all his vitality had reawakened at the coming of this slow-speaking man, who had looked so long upon the wide spaces of the earth that his vision seemed scarcely adaptable to lesser things. There was that in his personality that caught Piers' fancy irresistibly. Perhaps it was his utter calmness, his unvarying, rock-like strength. Perhaps it was just the good-fellowship that looked out of the steady eyes and sounded in every tone of the leisurely voice. Whatever the cause, his presence had made a vast difference to Piers. His boredom had completely vanished. He even forgot to wonder if there were a letter lying waiting for him inside the hotel.

Crowther excused himself at length and rose to take his leave, whereupon Sir Beverley very abruptly, and to his grandson's surprise and gratification, invited him to dine with them that night. Piers at once seconded the invitation, and Crowther, without haste or hesitation, accepted it. Then, square and purposeful, he went away.

"A white man!" murmured Piers half to himself.

"One who knows his own mind, anyhow," remarked Sir Beverley dryly.

He did not ask Piers for the history of their friendship, and Piers, remembering this later, wondered a little at the omission.

CHAPTER XXIII

A FRIEND'S COUNSEL

WHEN Piers went to dress that night he found two letters laid discreetly upon his table, awaiting perusal. Victor, busily engaged in laying out his clothes, cast a

wicked eye back over his shoulder as his young master pounced upon them; then with a shrug resumed his task, smiling to himself the while.

Both letters were addressed in womanly handwriting, but Piers went unerringly to the one he most desired to read. His hands shook a little as he opened it, but he caught sight of his Christian name at the head of it and breathed a sigh of relief.

"DEAR PIERS,"—so in clear, decided writing the message ran—"I have wondered many times if I ought to be angry as well as sorry over that letter of yours. It was audacious, wasn't it? Only I know so well that you did not mean to hurt me when you wrote it. But, Piers, what I said before, you compel me to say again. This thing must stop. You say you are not a boy, so I shall not treat you as such. But indeed you must take my word for it when I tell you that I shall never marry again.

"I want to be quite honest with you, so you mustn't think that my two years of married life were by any means idyllic. They were not. The man I married was a failure, but I loved him, and because I loved him I followed him to the world's end. We were engaged two years before we married. My father disapproved; but when he died I was left lonely, so I followed Eric, whom I had not seen for eighteen months, to Australia. We were married in Sydney. He had work at that time in a shipping office, but he did not manage to keep it. I did not know why at first. I was young, and I had always led a sheltered life. Then one night I found that he had been drinking, and after that I understood—many things. I think I know what you will say of him when you read this. It looks so crude written. But, Piers, he was not a bad man. He had this one fatal weakness, but he loved me, and he was good to me nearly always."

Piers' teeth closed suddenly and fiercely on his lower lip at this point; but he read on grimly with no other sign of indignation.

"Do you remember how I took upon myself once to warn you against losing your self-control?" (The handwriting was not quite so steady here; the letters looked hurried, as if some agitation had possessed the writer.) "I felt I had to do it, for I had seen a man's life completely wrecked through

it. I know he was one of the many that go under every day, but the tragedy was so near me. I have never been able quite to shake off the dreadful memories of it. He was to all outward appearance a strong-willed man, but that habit was stronger, though he fought and fought against it. When he failed, he seemed to lose everything—self-respect, self-control, strength of purpose—everything. But when the demon left him, he always repented so bitterly, so bitterly. I had a little money, enough to live on. He used to urge me to leave him, to go back to England, and live in peace. As if I could have done such a thing! And so we struggled on, making a desperately hard fight for it, till one awful night when he came home in raving delirium. I can't describe that to you. I don't want you to know what it was like. I nursed him through it, but it was terrible. He did not always know what he was doing. At times he was violent."

A drop of blood suddenly ran down Piers' chin; he pulled out his handkerchief sharply and wiped it away, still reading on.

"He got over it, but it broke him. He knew—we both knew—that things were hopeless. We tried for a time to shut our eyes to the fact, but it remained. And then one day very suddenly he roused himself, and told me that he had heard of a job up-country and was going to it. I could not stop him. I could not even go with him. And so—for the first time since our marriage—we parted. He promised to come back to me for the birth of our child. But before that happened he was dead, killed in a drunken brawl. It was just what I had always feared—the tragedy that overhung us from the beginning. Piers, that's all. I've told it very badly. But I felt you must know how my romance died; and how impossible it is that I should ever have another. It didn't break my heart. It wasn't sudden enough for that. And now that he is gone, I can see it is best. But the manner of his going—that was the dreadful part. I told you about my baby girl, how she was born blind, and how five years ago she died.

"So now you know my little tragic history from beginning to end. There is no accounting for love. We follow our instincts, I suppose. But it leads us sometimes along paths

that we could never bear to travel twice. Is there any pain, I wonder, like the pain of disillusionment, of seeing the beloved idol lying in the dust? This is a selfish point of view, I know; but I want you to realise that you have made a mistake. Dear Piers, I am very, very sorry it has happened. No, not angry at all; somehow I can't be angry. It's such a difficult world to live in, and there are so many influences at work. But you must forget this wish of yours, indeed—indeed. I am too old, too experienced, too worldly-wise, too prosaic for you in every way. You must marry a girl who has never loved before. You must have the first and best of a woman's heart. You must have 'The True Romance.'

"That, Piers, will always be the wish and prayer of

"Your loving friend,

"AVERY."

Piers' hands were steady enough now. There was something slow and fatalistic in the way they folded the letter. He looked up from it at length with dark eyes that gazed unwaveringly before him, as though they saw a vision.

"You will be late, *Monsieur Pierre*," suggested Victor softly at his elbow.

"What?" Piers turned those dreaming eyes upon him, and suddenly he laughed and stretched his arms wide as one awaking. The steadfast look went out of his eyes; they danced with gaiety. "Hullo, you old joker! Well, let's dress then and be quick about it!"

During the process it flashed upon Piers that all mention of Tudor had been avoided in the letter he had just read. He frowned momentarily at the thought. Had she deliberately avoided the subject? And, if so—— But on the instant his brow cleared again. No, she had written too frankly for that. She had not mentioned the matter simply because she regarded it as unimportant. The great question lay between herself and him alone. Of that he was wholly certain. He smiled again at the thought. No, he was not afraid of Tudor.

"*Monsieur* is well pleased," murmured Victor, with a flash of his round black eyes.

"Quite well pleased, *mon vieux!*" laughed back Piers.

"*C'est bien!*" said Victor, regarding him with the indulgent

smile that he had bestowed upon him in babyhood. "And *Monsieur* does not want his other letter? But no—no!"

His voice was openly quizzical; he dodged a laughing backhander from Piers with a neat gesture of apology. It had not escaped his notice that the letter Piers had read had disappeared unobtrusively into an inner pocket.

"Who's the other letter from?" said Piers, glancing at it perfunctorily. "Oh, I know. No one of importance. She'll keep till after dinner."

Ina Rose would not have felt flattered had she heard the statement. The fan Piers had promised to send her had duly arrived from Paris with a brief—very brief—note from him, requesting her acceptance of it. She had written in reply a letter which she had been at some pains to compose, graciously accepting the gift and suggesting that an account of any adventures that befell him would be received by her with interest. She added that, a spell of frost having put an end to the hunting, life at Wardenhurst had become extremely flat, and she had begun to envy Piers in his exile. Her father was talking of going to Mentone for a few weeks, and wanted her to accompany him. But she was not sure that she would care for it. What did Piers think?

When Piers did eventually read the letter, he smiled at this point—a smile that was not altogether good to see. He was just going out to the Casino with Crowther. The latter had gone to fetch a coat, and he had occupied the few moments of waiting with Ina's letter.

He was still smiling over the open page when Crowther joined him; but he folded the letter at once, and they went out together.

"Have you had any luck at the tables?" Crowther asked.

"None," said Piers. "At least I won eventually, but Fate, in the form of a powdered and bedizened female, snatched the proceeds before I got the chance. A bad omen—what?"

"I hope not," said Crowther.

There was a touch of savagery in Piers' laugh. "It won't happen again, anyhow," he said.

They entered the Casino with its brilliant rooms and pushing crowds. The place was thronged. As they entered, a woman with a face of evil beauty, pressed close to Piers and spoke a word or two in French. But he looked at her and through her with royal disdain, and so passed her by.

They made their way to the table at which Piers had tried his luck the previous night, waited for and finally secured a place.

"You take it!" said Crowther. "I believe in your luck."

Piers laughed. He staked five francs on the figure five and lost; doubled his stakes and lost again; trebled them and lost again.

"This is getting serious," said Crowther.

But still Piers laughed. "Damn it!" he said. "I will win to-night."

"Try another figure!" said Crowther.

But Piers refused. He laid down twenty-five francs, and with that he won. It was the turning-point. From that moment it seemed he could not do wrong. Stake after stake he won, either with his own money or Crowther's, and finally left the table in triumph with full pockets.

A good many watched him enviously as he went. He refused to try his luck elsewhere, but went arrogantly away with his hand through Crowther's arm.

"He'll come back to-morrow," observed a shrewd American. "And the next day, and the next. He's just the sort that helps to keep this establishment going. They'll pick him clean."

But he was wrong. Though elated by victory, Piers was not drawn by the gambling vice. The thing amused him, but it did not greatly attract. He was by no means dazzled by the spoils he carried away.

They went out to the gardens, and called for liqueurs. The woman who had spoken to Piers yet hovered about the doors. She cursed him through her painted lips as he passed, but he went by her like a prince, haughtily aloof, contemptuously regardless.

They sat down in a comparatively quiet corner, whence they could watch the ever-shifting picture without being disturbed. A very peculiar mood possessed Piers. He was restless and uneasy, in spite of his high spirits. For no definite reason he wanted to keep on the move. In deference to Crowther's wish he controlled the desire, but it was an obvious effort.

He seemed to find difficulty also in attending to Crowther's quiet remarks, and after a while Crowther ceased to make them. He finished his liqueur and sat smoking, with his

eyes on the dark, sensitive face that watched the passing crowd so indifferently, yet so persistently.

Piers noticed his silence at last, and looked at him inquiringly. "Shall we go?"

Crowther leaned slowly towards him. The place was public, but their privacy was complete.

"Piers," he said, "may I take the privilege of an old friend?"

"You may take anything you like so far as I am concerned," said Piers impetuously.

Crowther smiled a little. "Thank you. Then I will go ahead. Are you engaged to be married?"

"What?" said Piers. He looked momentarily startled; then laughed across the table with a freedom that was wholly unaffected. "Am I engaged, did you say? No, I'm not. But I'm going to be married for all that."

"Ah!" said Crowther. "I thought I knew the signs."

He rose with the words, and instantly Piers sprang up also. "Yes, let's go! I can't breathe here. Come down to the shore for a breath of air, and I'll tell you all about it!"

He linked his arm again in Crowther's, obviously glad to be gone; but when they had left the glittering place behind them, he still talked inconsequently about a thousand things, till in his calm fashion Crowther turned him back.

"I don't want you to tell me anything personal," he said, "save one thing. This girl whom you hope to marry—I gather you are pretty sure of her?"

Piers threw back his head with a gesture that defied the world. "I am quite sure of her," he said; and a moment later, with impulsive confidence: "She has just taken the trouble to write at length and tell me why she can't have me."

"Ah?" Crowther's tone held curiosity as well as kindly sympathy. "A sound reason?"

"No reason at all," flung back Piers, still with his face to the stars. "She knows that as well as I do. I tell you, Crowther, I know the way to that woman's heart, and I could find it blindfold. She is mine already."

"And doesn't know it?" suggested Crowther.

"Yes, she does in her heart of hearts—or soon will. I shall send her a postcard to-morrow and sum up the situation."

"On a postcard?"

Crowther sounded puzzled, and Piers broke into a laugh and descended to earth.

"Yes, in one expressive word—'Rats!' No one else will understand it, but she will."

"A little abrupt!" commented Crowther.

"Yes, I'm going to be abrupt now," said Piers with imperial confidence. "I'm going to storm the position."

"And you are sure you will carry it?"

"Quite sure." Piers' voice held not the faintest shade of doubt.

"I hope you will, lad," said Crowther kindly. "And—that being the case—may I say what I set out to say?"

"Oh, go ahead!" said Piers.

"It's only this," said Crowther, in his slow, quiet way. "Only a word of advice, sonny, which I shouldn't give if I didn't know that your life's happiness hangs on your taking it. You're young, but there's a locked door in your past. Open that door just once before you marry the woman you love, and show her what is behind it! It'll give her a shock, maybe. But it'll be better for you both in the end. Don't let there be any locked doors between you and your wife! You're too young for that. And if she's the right sort, it won't make a pin's difference to her love. Women are like that, thank God!"

He spoke with the utmost earnestness. He was evidently keenly anxious to gain his point. But his words went into utter silence. Ere they were fully spoken Piers' hand was withdrawn from his arm. His careless, swinging stride became a heavy, slackening tramp, and at last he halted altogether. They stood side by side in silence with their faces to the moon-silvered water. And there fell a long, long pause, as though the whole world stopped and listened.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE PROMISE

AFTER all it was Crowther who broke that tragic silence, perhaps because he could bear it no longer. The path on which they stood was deserted. He laid a very steady hand upon Piers' shoulder with a compassionate glance

at the stony young face which a few minutes before had been so full of abounding life.

"It comes hard to you, eh, lad?" he said.

Piers stirred, almost made as if he would toss the friendly hand away; but in the end he suffered it, though he would not meet Crowther's eyes.

"You owe it to her," urged Crowther gently. "Tell her, lad! She's bound to be up against it sooner or later if you don't."

"Yes," Piers said, "I know."

He spoke heavily; all the youth seemed to have gone out of him. After a moment, as Crowther waited, he turned with a gesture of hopelessness and faced him. "I'm like a dog on a chain," he said. "I drag this way and that and eat my heart out for freedom. But it's all no use. I've got to live and die on it." He clenched his hands in sudden passionate rebellion. "But I'm damned if I'm going to tell anybody! It's hell enough without that!"

Crowther's hand closed slowly and very steadily on his shoulder. "It's just hell that I want to save you from, sonny," he said. "It may seem the hardest part to you now, but if you shirk it you'll go further in still. I know very well what I'm saying. And it's just because you're man enough to feel this thing, and not a brute beast to forget it, that it's hurt you so infernally all these years. But it'll hurt you worse, lad, it'll wring your very soul, if you keep it a secret between you and the woman you love. It's a big temptation, but—if I know you—you're going to stand up to it. She'll think the better of you for it in the end. But it'll be a shadow over both your lives if you don't. And there are some things that even a woman might find it hard to forgive."

He stopped. Piers' eyes were hard and fixed. He scarcely looked as if he heard. From below them there arose the murmur of the moonlit sea. Close at hand the trees in a garden stirred mysteriously, as though they moved in their sleep. But Piers made neither sound nor movement. He stood like an image of stone.

Again the silence began to lengthen intolerably, to stretch out into a desert of emptiness, to become fateful with a bitterness too poignant to be uttered. Crowther said no more. He had had his say. He waited with unswerving patience for the result.

Piers spoke at last, and there was a queer note of humour in his voice—humour that was tragic. "So I've got to go aback again, have I? Back to my valley of dry bones! There's no climbing the heights for me, Crowther—never will be. Somehow or other, I am always tumbled back."

"You're wrong," Crowther said, with quiet decision. "It's the only way out. Take it like a man, and you'll win through! Shirk it and—well, sonny, no shirker ever yet got anything worth having out of life. You know that as well as I do."

Piers straightened himself with a brief laugh. "Yes, I know that much. But—I sometimes ask myself if I'm any better than a shirker. Life is such a beastly farce so far as I am concerned. I never do anything. There's never anything to do."

"Oh, rats!" said Crowther, and smiled. "There are not many fellows who do half as much. If to-day is a fair sample of your life, I'm damned if it's an easy one."

"I'm used to it," said Piers quickly. "You know, I'm awfully fond of my grandfather—always have been. We suit each other marvellously well—in some ways." He paused a moment, then, with an effort: "I never told him either, Crowther. I never told a soul."

"No," Crowther said. "I don't see any reason that you should. But the woman you marry—she is different. If you take her into your inner life at all, she is bound to come upon it sooner or later. You must see it, lad. You know it in your heart."

"And you think she will marry me when she knows I'm a—murderer?" Piers uttered the word through clenched teeth. He had the haggard look of a man who has endured long suffering.

There was deep compassion in Crowther's eyes as he watched him. "I don't think—being a woman—she will put it in that way," he said, "not, that is, if she loves you."

"How else could she put it?" demanded Piers harshly. "Is there any other way of putting it? I killed the man intentionally. I told you so at the time. The fellow who taught me the trick warned me that it would almost certainly be fatal to a heavy man taken unawares. Why, he himself is now doing five years' penal servitude for the very same thing. Oh, I'm not a humbug, Crowther. I bolted from

the consequences. You made me bolt. But I've often wished to heaven since that I'd stayed and faced it out. It would have been easier in the end, God knows."

"My dear fellow," Crowther said, "you will never convince me of that as long as you live. There was nothing to gain by your staying and all to lose. Consequences there were bound to be—and always are. But there was no good purpose to be served by wrecking your life. You were only a boy, and the luck was against you. I couldn't have stood by and seen you dragged under."

Piers groaned. "I sometimes wish I was dead!" he said.

"My dear chap, what's the good of that?" Crowther slipped his hand from his shoulder to his arm and drew him quietly forward. "You've suffered infernally, but it's made a man of you. Don't forget that! It's the Sculptor and the Clay, lad. He knows how best to fashion a good thing. It isn't for the clay to cry out."

"Is that your point of view?" Piers spoke with reckless bitterness. "It isn't mine."

"You'll come to it," said Crowther gently.

They walked on for a space in silence, till turning, they began to ascend the winding path that led up to the hotel—the path which Piers had watched Crowther ascend that morning.

Side by side they mounted, till half-way up Crowther checked their progress. "Piers," he said, "I'm grateful to you for enduring my interference in this matter."

"Pshaw!" said Piers. "I owe you that much, anyhow."

"You owe me nothing," said Crowther emphatically. "What I did for you I did for myself. I've rather a weakness—it's a very ordinary one, too—for trying to manage other people's concerns. And there's something so fine about you that I can't bear to stand aside and see you mess up your own. So, sonny—for my satisfaction—will you promise me not to take a wrong turning over this?"

He spoke very earnestly, with a pleading that could not give offence. Piers' face softened almost in spite of him. "You're an awfully good chap," he said.

"Promise me, lad!" pleaded Crowther, still holding his arm in a friendly grasp: then as Piers hesitated: "You know, I'm an older man than you are. I can see further. You'll be making your own hell if you don't."

"But why should I promise?" said Piers uneasily.

"Because I know you will keep a promise—even against your own judgment." Simply, with absolute conviction, Crowther made reply. "I shan't feel happy about you—unless you promise."

Piers smiled a little, but the lines about his mouth were grim. "Oh, all right," he said, after a moment, "I promise; for—for I think you are right, Crowther. I think, too, that I should probably have had to tell her—whether I wanted to or not. She's that sort—the sort that none but a skunk could deceive. But"—his voice altered suddenly; he turned brooding eyes upon the sleeping sea—"I wonder if she will forgive me?" he said. "I—wonder?"

"Does she love you?" said Crowther.

Piers' eyes flashed round at him. "I can make her love me," he said.

"You are sure?"

"I am sure."

"Then, my son, she'll forgive you. And if you want to play a straight game, tell her soon!" said Crowther.

And Piers, with all the light gone out of his eyes, answered soberly, "I will."

CHAPTER XXV

DROSS

IN the morning they hired horses and went towards the mountains. The day was cloudless, but Sir Beverley would not be persuaded to accompany them.

"I'm not in the mood for exertion," he said to Piers. "Besides, I detest hired animals, always did. I shall spend an intellectual morning listening to the band."

"Hope you won't be bored, sir," said Piers.

"Your going or coming wouldn't effect that one way or another," responded Sir Beverley.

Whereat Piers laughed and went his way.

He was curiously light-hearted again that morning. The soft Southern air, with its many perfumes, exhilarated him like wine. The scent of the orange-groves rose as incense to the sun.

The animal he rode danced a skittish side-step from time to time. It was impossible to go with sober mien.

"It's a good land," said Crowther.

"Flowing with milk and honey," laughed Piers, with his eyes on the olive-clothed slopes. "But there's no country like one's own—what?"

"No country like England, you mean," said Crowther.

"Of course I do, but I was too polite to say so."

"You needn't be polite to me," said Crowther with his slow smile. "And England happens to be my country. I am as British"—he glanced at Piers' dark face—"perhaps even a little more so—than you are."

"I plead guilty to an Italian grandmother," said Piers. "But you—I thought you were Colonial."

"I am British born and bred," said Crowther.

"You?" Piers looked at him in surprise. "You don't belong to Australia, then?"

"Only by adoption. I was the son of an English parson. I was destined for the Church myself for the first twenty years of my life." Crowther was still smiling, but his eyes had left Piers; they scanned the horizon contemplatively.

"Great Scot!" said Piers. "Lucky escape for you—what?"

"I didn't think so at the time," Crowther spoke thoughtfully, sitting motionless in his saddle and gazing straight before him. "You see, I was keen on the religious life. I was narrow in my views—I was astonishingly narrow; but I was keen."

"Ye gods!" said Piers.

He looked at the square, strong figure incredulously. Somehow he could not associate Crowther with any but a vigorous, out-door existence.

"You would never have stuck to it," he said, after a moment. "You'd have loathed the life."

"I don't think so," said Crowther, in his deliberate way, "though I admit I probably shouldn't have expanded much. It wasn't easy to give it up at the time."

"What made you do it?" asked Piers.

"Necessity. When my father died, my mother was left with a large family and quite destitute. I was the eldest, and a sheep-farming uncle—a brother of hers—offered me a wage sufficient to keep her going if I would give up the

Church and join him. I was already studying. I could have pushed through on my own; but I couldn't have supported her. So I had to go. That was the beginning of my Colonial life. It was five-and-twenty years ago, and I've never been Home since."

He turned his horse quietly round to continue the ascent. The road was steep. They went slowly side by side.

Crowther went on in a grave, detached way, as though he were telling the story of another man's life. "I kicked hard at going, but I've lived to be thankful that I went. I had to rough it, and it did me good. It was just that I wanted. There's never much fun for a stranger in a strange land, sonny, and it took me some time to shake down. In fact just for a while I thought I couldn't stand it. The loneliness out there on those acres and acres of grass-land was so awful; for I was city-bred. I'd never been in the desert, never been out of the sound of church-bells." He began to smile again. "I'd even got a sort of feeling that God wasn't to be found outside civilization," he said. "I think we get ultra-civilized in our ideas sometimes. And the emptiness was almost overpowering. It was like being shut down behind bars of iron, with occasional glimpses of hell to enliven the monotony. That was when one went to the townships, and saw life. They didn't tempt me at first. I was too narrow even for that. But the loneliness went on eating and eating into me, till I got so desperate that in the end I was ready to snatch at any diversion." He paused a moment, and into his steady eyes there came a shadow that made them very human. "I went to hell," he said. "I waded up to the neck in mire. I gave myself up to it body and soul. I wallowed. And all the while it revolted me, though it was so sickeningly easy and attractive. I loathed myself, but I went on with it. It seemed, anyhow, one degree better than that awful home-sickness. And then one day, right in the middle of it all, I had a sort of dream. Or perhaps it wasn't any more a dream than Jacob had in the desert. But I felt as if I'd been called, and I just had to get up and go. I expect most people know the sensation, for, after all, the Kingdom of Heaven is within us; but it made a bigger impression on me at the time than anything in my experience. So I went back into the wilderness and waited. Old chap, I didn't wait in vain."

He suddenly turned his head, and his eyes rested upon Piers with the serenity of a man at peace with his own soul. "That's about all my story," he said with simplicity. "I got the strength for the job, and so carried it through. When my uncle died, I was left in command, and I've stuck to it ever since. But I took a partner a few years back, and now I've handed over the whole thing to him, and I'm going home at last to my old mother."

"Going to settle in England?" asked Piers.

Crowther shook his head. "Not now, lad. I couldn't. There's too much to be done. No; I'm going to fulfil my old ambitions if I can. I'm going to get myself ordained. After that——"

He paused, for Piers had turned to stare at him in open amazement. "You!" he ejaculated.

Crowther's smile came over his face like a spreading light. "You don't think much of persons, I gather, sonny," he said.

Piers broke into his sudden laugh. "Not as a tribe, I admit. I can't stand any man who makes an ass of himself, whatever his profession. But, of course, I don't mean to assert that all parsons answer to that description. I've met a few I liked."

Crowther's smile developed into a laugh. "Then you won't deprive me of the pleasure of your friendship if I become one?"

"My dear chap," said Piers forcibly, "if you became the biggest blackguard in creation, you would remain my friend."

It was regally spoken, but the speaker was plainly so unconscious of arrogance that Crowther's hand came out to him and lay for a moment on his arm. "I gathered that, sonny," he said gently.

Piers' eyes flashed sympathy. "And what are you going to do then? You say you're not going to settle in England?"

"I am not," said Crowther, and again he was looking out ahead of him with eyes that spanned the far distance. "No; I'm going back again to the old haunts. There's a thundering lot to do there. It's more than a one-man job. But, please God, I'll do what I can. I know I can do a little. It's a hell of a place, sonny. You saw the outside edge of it yourself."

Piers nodded without speaking. It had been in a sense his baptism of fire.

"It's the new chums I want to get hold of," Crowther said. "They get drawn in so devilishly easily. They're like children, many of 'em, trying to walk on quicksands. They're bound to go in, bound to go under, and a big percentage never come up again. It's the children I want to help. I hate to think of fresh, clean lives being thrown on to the dust-heap. It's so futile—such a crying waste."

"If anyone can do it, you can," said Piers.

"Ah! I wonder. It won't be easy, but I know their temptations so awfully well. I've seen scores go under. I've been under myself. And that makes a lot of difference."

"Life is infernally difficult for most of us," said Piers.

They rode in silence for a while, and then he changed the subject.

It was not till they returned that Crowther announced his intention of leaving on the following day.

"I've no time for slacking," he said. "I didn't come home to slack. And there's the mother waiting for me."

"Oh, man," Piers said suddenly, "how I wish I had a mother!"

And then, half ashamed, he turned and went in search of his grandfather.

Again that evening Crowther accepted Sir Beverley's invitation to dine at their table. The old man seemed to regard Piers' friend with a kind of suspicious interest. He asked few questions, but he watched him narrowly.

"If you and the boy want to go to the Casino again, don't mind me!" he said, at the end of dinner.

"We don't, sir," said Piers promptly. "Can't we sit out on the terrace all together and smoke?"

"I don't go beyond the lounge," said Sir Beverley, with decision.

"All right, we'll sit in the lounge," said Piers.

His grandfather frowned at him. "Don't be a fool, Piers! Can't you see you're not wanted?" He thrust out an abrupt hand to Crowther. "Good-night to you! I shall probably retire before you come in."

"He is leaving first thing in the morning," said Piers.

Sir Beverley's frown was transferred to Crowther. He looked at him piercingly. "Leaving, are you? Going to England, eh? I suppose we shall meet again, then?"

"I hope so," said Crowther.

Sir Beverley grunted. "Do you? Well, we shan't be moving yet. But—if you care to look us up at Rodding Abbey when we do get back—you can; eh, Piers?"

"I tell him he must, sir," said Piers.

"You are very kind," said Crowther. "Good-bye, sir And thank you!"

He and Piers went out together, and walked to and fro in the garden above the sea. The orchestra played fitfully in the hotel behind them, and now and then there came the sounds of careless voices and wandering feet. They themselves talked but little. Piers was in a dreamy mood, and his companion was plainly deep in thought.

He spoke at length out of a long silence. "Did your grandfather say Rodding Abbey just now?"

"Yes," said Piers, waking up.

"It's near a place called Wardenhurst?" pursued Crowther.

"Yes," said Piers again. "Ever been there?"

"No." Crowther spoke slowly, as though considering his words. "Someone I know lives there; that's all."

"Someone you know?" Piers stood still. He looked at Crowther sharply through the dimness.

"I don't suppose you have ever met her, lad," said Crowther quietly. "From what I know of society in the old country, you wouldn't move in the same circle. But as I have promised myself to visit her, it seems better to mention the fact."

"Why shouldn't you mention it? What is her name?" Piers spoke quickly, in the imperious fashion habitual to him when not quite at his ease.

Crowther hesitated. He seemed to be debating some point with himself.

At length, "Her name," he said slowly, "is Denys."

Piers made a sudden movement that passed unexplained. There fell a few moments of silence. Then, in a voice even more measured than Crowther's, he spoke:

"As it happens, I have met her. Tell me what you know about her—if you don't mind."

Again Crowther hesitated.

"Go on," said Piers.

They were facing one another in the darkness. The end of Piers' cigar had ceased to glow. He did not seem to be breathing. But in the tense moments that followed his

words there came to Crowther the hard, quick beating of his heart, like the thud of a racing engine far away.

Instinctively he put out a hand. "Piers, old chap——" he said.

"Go on!" Piers said again.

He gripped both hand and wrist with nervous fingers, holding them almost as though he would force from him the information he desired.

Crowther waited no longer, for he knew in that moment that he stood in the presence of a soul in torment. "You'll have to know it," he said, "though why these things happen God alone knows. Sonny, she is the widow of the man whose death you caused."

The words were spoken, and after them came silence—such a silence as could be felt. Once the hands that gripped Crowther's seemed about to slacken, and then in a moment they tightened again as the hands of a drowning man clinging to a spar.

Crowther attempted nothing in the way of sympathy or consolation. He merely stood ready. But it was evident that he did not need to be told of the tragedy that had suddenly fallen upon Piers' life. His attitude said as much.

Very, very slowly at last, as if not wholly sure of his balance, Piers let him go. He took out his cigar with a mechanical movement and looked at it; then abruptly returned it to his lips and drew it fiercely back to life.

Then, through a cloud of smoke, he spoke: "Crowther, I made you a promise yesterday."

"You did," said Crowther gravely.

Piers threw him a quick look. "Oh, you needn't be afraid," he said. "I'm not going to cry off. It's not my way. But—I want you to make me a promise in return."

"What is it, sonny?" There was just a hint of anxiety in Crowther's tone.

Piers made a reckless, half-defiant movement of the head. "It is that you will never—whatever the circumstances—speak of this thing again to anyone—not even to me."

"You think it necessary to ask that of me?" said Crowther.

"No, I don't!" impulsively Piers made answer. "I believe I'm a cur to ask it. But this thing has dogged me so persistently that I feel like an animal being run to earth.

For my peace of mind, Crowther—because I'm a coward, if you like—give me your word on it!"

He laid a hand not wholly steady upon Crowther's shoulder, and impelled him forward. His voice was low and agitated.

"Forgive me, old chap!" he urged. "And understand, if you can. It's all you can do to help."

"My dear lad, of course I do!" Instant and reassuring came Crowther's reply. "If you want my promise, you have it. The business is yours, not mine. I shall never interfere."

"Thank you—thanks awfully!" Piers said.

He drew a great breath. His hand went through Crowther's arm.

"That gives me time to think," he said. "What an infernal tangle this beastly world is! I suppose you think there's a reason for everything?"

"You've heard of gold being tried in the fire," said Crowther.

Piers broke into his sudden laugh. "I'm not gold, my dear chap, but the tinniest dross that ever was made. Shall we go and have a drink—what? This sort of thing always makes me thirsty."

It was characteristically abrupt. It ended the matter in a trice. They went together to the hotel buffet, and there Piers quenched his thirst. It was while there that Crowther became aware that his mood had wholly changed. He laughed and joked with the bright-eyed French girl who waited upon them, and seemed loth to depart. Silently, but with a growing anxiety, Crowther watched him. There was certainly nothing forced about his gaiety. It was wildly, recklessly spontaneous; but there was about it a fevered quality that set Crowther almost instinctively on his guard. He did not know, and he had no means of gauging, exactly how deeply the iron had pierced. But that some sort of wound had been inflicted he could not doubt. It might be merely a superficial one, but he feared that it was something more than that. There was a queer, intangible species of mockery in Piers' attitude, as though he set the whole world at defiance.

And yet he did not look like a man who had been stunned by an unexpected, sledge-hammer blow of Fate. He was keenly, fiercely alive to his surroundings. He seemed to be gibing rather at a blow that had glanced aside. Uneasily Crowther wondered.

It was he who finally suggested a move. It was growing late.

"So it is!" said Piers. "You ought to be turning in if you really mean to make an early start."

He stood still in the hall and held out his hand. "Good night, old chap! I'm not going up at present."

"You'd better," said Crowther.

"No, I can't. I couldn't possibly turn in yet." He thrust his hand upon Crowther. "Good night! I shall see you in the morning."

Crowther took the hand. The hall was deserted. They stood together under a swinging lamp, and by its flaring light Crowther sought to read his companion's face.

For a moment or two Piers refused to meet his look, then with sudden stubbornness he raised his eyes and stared back. They shone as black and hard as ebony.

"Good night!" he said again.

Crowther's level brows were slightly drawn. His hand, square and strong, closed upon Piers' and held it.

For a few seconds he did not speak; then: "I don't know that I feel like turning in yet either, sonny," he said deliberately.

Piers made a swift movement of impatience. His eyes seemed to grow brighter, more grimly hard.

"I'm afraid I must ask you to excuse me in any case," he said. "I'm going up to see if my grandfather has all he wants."

It was defiantly spoken. He turned with the words, almost wresting his hand free, and strode away towards the lift.

Reaching it, some sense of compunction seemed to touch him, for he looked back over his shoulder with an abrupt gesture of farewell.

Crowther made no answering sign. He stood gravely watching. But, as the lift shot upwards, he turned aside and began squarely to ascend the stairs.

When Piers came out of his room ten minutes later, with a coat over his arm, he came face to face with him in the corridor. There was a certain grimness apparent about Crowther also by that time. He offered no explanation of his presence, although quite obviously he was waiting.

Piers stood still. There was a dangerous glitter in his eyes that came and went. "Look here, Crowther!" he said. "It's no manner of use your attempting this game

with me. I'm going out, and—whether you like it or not, I don't care a damn—I'm going alone."

"Where are you going?" said Crowther.

"To the Casino." Piers flung the words with a gleam of clenched teeth.

Crowther looked at him straight and hard. "What for?" he asked.

"What do people generally go for?" Piers prepared to move on as he uttered the question.

But Crowther deliberately blocked his way. "No, Piers," he said quietly. "You're not going to-night."

The blood rose in a great wave to Piers' forehead. His eyes shone suddenly red. "Do you think you're going to stop me?" he said.

"For to-night, sonny—yes." Quite decidedly Crowther made reply. "To-morrow you will be your own master. But to-night—well, you've had a bit of a knock-out; you're off your balance. Don't go to-night!"

He spoke with earnest appeal, but he still blocked the passage squarely, stoutly, immovably.

The hot flush died out of Piers' face; he went slowly white. But the blaze of wrath in his eyes leaped higher. For the moment he looked scarcely sane.

"If you don't clear out of my path, I shall throw you!" he said, speaking very quietly, but with a terrible distinctness that made misunderstanding impossible.

Crowther, level-browed and determined, remained where he was. "I don't think you will," he said.

"Don't you?" A faint smile of derision twisted Piers' lips. He gathered up the coat he carried, and threw it across his shoulder.

Crowther watched him with eyes that never varied. "Piers!" he said.

"Well?" Piers looked at him, still with that slight, grim smile.

Crowther stood like a rock. "I will let you pass, sonny, if you can tell me—on your word of honour as a gentleman—that the tables are all you have in your mind."

Piers tossed back his head with the action of an angry beast. "What the devil has that to do with you?"

"Everything," said Crowther.

He moved at last, quietly, massively, and took Piers by

the shoulders. "My son," he said, "I know where you are going. I've been there myself. But in God's name, lad, don't—don't go! There are some stains that never come out, though one would give all one had to be rid of them."

"Let me go!" said Piers.

He was breathing quickly; his eyes gazed fiercely into the elder man's face. He made no violent movement, but his whole body was tensely strung to resist.

Crowther's hands tightened upon him. "Not to-night!" he said.

"Yes, now!" Something of electricity ran through Piers; there came, as it were, the ripple of muscles contracting for a spring. Yet still he stood motionless, menacing but inactive.

"I will not!" Sudden and hard Crowther's answer came; his hold became a grip. By sheer unexpectedness of action, he forced Piers back against the door behind him.

It gave inwards, and they stumbled into the darkness of the bedroom.

"You fool!" said Piers. "You fool!"

Yet he gave ground, scarcely resisting, and coming up against the bed, sat down upon it suddenly as if spent.

There fell a brief silence, a tense, hard-breathing pause. Then Piers reached up and freed himself.

"Oh, go away, Crowther!" he said. "You're a kind old ass, but I don't want you. And you needn't spend the night in the corridor, either. See? Just go to bed like a Christian and let me do the same."

The struggle was over; so suddenly, so amazingly, that Crowther stood dumbfounded. He had girded himself to wrestle with a giant, but there was nothing formidable about the boy who sat on the edge of his bed and laughed at him with easy ridicule.

"Why don't you switch on the light," he jeered, "and have a good look round for the devil? He was here a minute ago. What? Don't you believe in devils? That's heresy. All good parsons——" He got up suddenly and went to the switch. In a second the room was flooded with light. He returned to Crowther with the full glare on his face, and the only expression it wore was one of careless friendliness. He held out his hand. "Good night, dear old fellow! Say your prayers and go to bed! And you needn't have

any more nightmares on my account. I'm going to turn in myself directly."

There was no mistaking his sincerity, or the completeness of his surrender. Crowther could but take the extended hand, and in silent astonishment treat the incident as closed.

He even wondered as he went away if he had not possibly exaggerated the whole matter, though at the heart of him he knew that this was only what Piers himself desired him to believe. He could not but feel convinced, however, that the danger was passed for the time at least. In his own inimitable fashion Piers had succeeded in reassuring him. He was fully satisfied that the boy would keep his word, for his faith in him was absolute. But he felt the victory that was his to be a baffling one. He had conquered merely because Piers of his own volition had ceased to resist. He did not understand that sudden submission. Like Sir Beverley, he was puzzled by it. There was about it a mysterious quality that eluded his understanding. He would have given a good deal for a glimpse of the motive that lay behind.

But he had to go without it. Piers was in no expansive mood. Perhaps he might have found it difficult to explain himself even had he so desired.

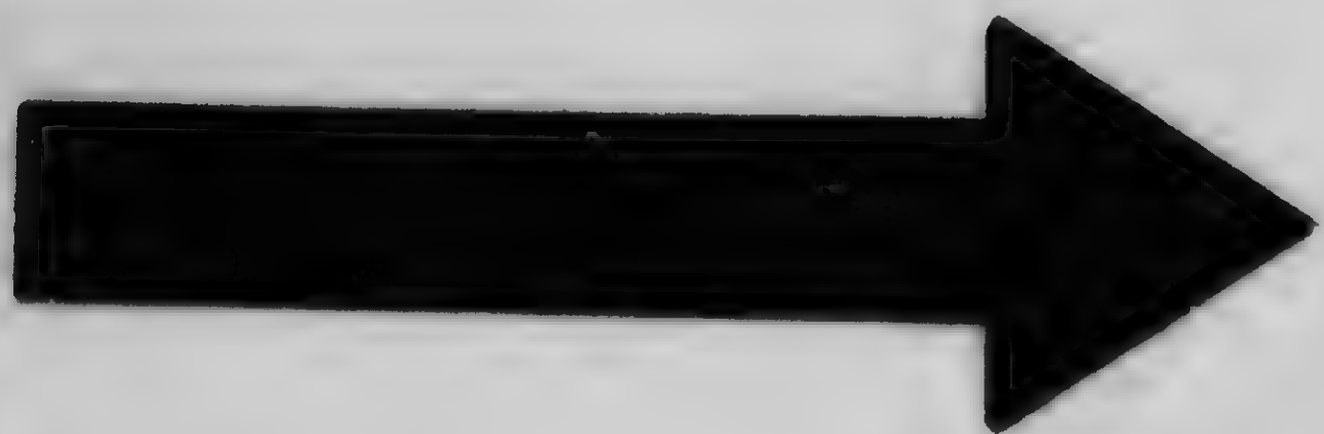
Whatever the motive that had urged him, it urged him no longer, or it had been diverted into a side-channel. For almost as soon as he was alone, he threw himself down and scribbled a careless line to Ina Rose, advising her to accompany her father to Mentone, and adding that he believed she would not be bored there.

When he had dispatched Victor with the letter, he flung his window wide and leaned out of it, with his eyes wide opened on the darkness, and on his lips that smile that was not good to see.

CHAPTER XXVI

SUBSTANCE

IT was a blustering spring day, and Avery, caught in a sudden storm of driving sleet, stood up against the railings of the doctor's house, sheltering as best she might. She was holding her umbrella well in the teeth of the gale, and trying to protect an armful of purchases as well.



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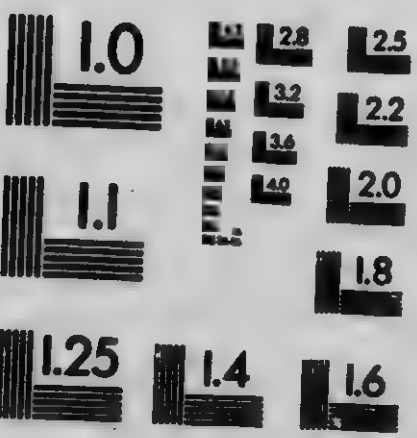

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She was alone—Gracie, the black sheep, having been sent to school at the close of the Christmas holidays, and Jeanie being confined to the house with a severe cold. Olive, having become more and more her father's constant companion, disdained shopping expeditions. The two elder boys and Pat were all at a neighbouring school as weekly boarders, and though she missed them, Avery had it not in her heart to regret the arrangement. The Vicarage might at times seem dreary, but it had become undeniably an abode of peace.

Mrs. Lorimer was gradually recovering her strength, and Avery's care now centred more upon Jeanie than her mother. Though the child had recovered from her accident, she had not been really well all the winter, and the cold spring seemed to tax her strength to the uttermost. Tudor still dropped in at intervals, but he said little, and his manner did not encourage Avery to question him. Privately, she was growing anxious about Jeanie, and she wished that he would be more communicative. He had absolutely forbidden book-work, a fiat to which Mr. Lorimer had yielded under protest.

"The child will grow up a positive dunce," he had declared.

To which Tudor had brusquely rejoined: "What of it?"

But his word was law so far as Jeanie was concerned, and Mr. Lorimer had relinquished the point with the sigh of one submitting to the inevitable. He did not like Lennox Tudor, but for some reason he always avoided an open disagreement with him.

It was of Jeanie that Avery was thinking as she stood there huddled against the railings, while the sleet beat a fierce tattoo on her levelled umbrella and streamed from it in rivers on to the ground. She even debated with herself if it seemed advisable to turn and enter the doctor's dwelling, and try to get him to speak frankly of the matter as he had spoken once before.

She dismissed the idea, however, reflecting that he would most probably be out, and she was on the point of collecting her forces to make a rush for another sheltered spot further on, when the front door opened unexpectedly behind her, and Tudor himself came forth bareheaded into the rain.

"What are you doing there, Mrs. Denys?" he said. "Why don't you come inside?"

He opened the gate for her, and took her parcels without

waiting for a reply. And Avery, still with her umbrella poised against the blast, smiled her thanks and passed in.

The hair grew far back on Tudor's forehead; it was, in fact, becoming scanty on the top of his head; and the raindrops glistened upon it as he entered behind Avery. He wiped them away, and then took off his glasses and wiped them also.

"Come into the dining-room!" he said. "You are just in time to join me at tea."

"You're very kind," Avery said. "But I ought to hurry back the moment the rain lessens."

"It won't lessen yet," said Tudor. "Take off your mackintosh, won't you? I expect your feet are wet. There's a fire to dry them by."

Certainly the storm showed no signs of abating. The sky was growing darker every instant. Avery slipped the streaming mackintosh from her shoulders and entered the room into which he invited her.

The blaze on the hearth was cheering after the icy gale without. She went to it, stretching her numbed hands to the warmth.

Tudor pushed forward a chair. "I believe you are chilled to the bone," he said.

She laughed at that. "Oh no, indeed I am not! But it is a cold wind, isn't it? Have you finished your work for to-day?"

Tudor foraged in a cupboard for an extra cup and saucer. "No. I've got to go out again later. I've just come back from Miss Whalley's. She's got a touch of jaundice."

"Oh, poor thing!" said Avery.

"Yes; poor thing!" echoed Tudor grimly. "She is very sorry for herself, I can assure you, but as full of gossip as ever." He paused.

Avery, with her face to the fire, laughed a little. "Anything new?"

"Miss Whalley," said Tudor deliberately, "always gets hold of something new. Never noticed that?"

"Wouldn't you like me to pour out?" suggested Avery.

"No. You keep your feet in the fender. Do you want to hear the latest tittle-tattle—or not?"

There was a wary gleam behind Tudor's glasses; but Avery did not turn her eyes from the fire. A curious little

feeling of uneasiness possessed her, a sensation that scarcely amounted to dread, yet which quickened the beating of her heart in a fashion that she found vaguely disconcerting.

"Don't tell me anything ugly!" she said gently, still not looking at him.

Tudor uttered a short laugh. "There's nothing especially venomous about it that I can see." He lifted the teapot and began to pour. "Have you heard from young Evesham lately?"

The question was casually uttered, but Avery's hands made a slight involuntary movement over the fire towards which she leaned.

"No," she said.

At the same moment the cup that Tudor was filling overflowed, and he whispered something under his breath and set down the teapot.

Avery turned towards him instinctively, to see him dabbing the table with his handkerchief.

"It's almost too dark to see what one is doing," he said.

"It is," she assented gravely, and turned back quietly to the fire, not offering to assist. A soft veil of reserve seemed to have descended upon her. She did not speak again until he had remedied the disaster and brought her some tea. Then, with absolute composure, she raised her eyes to his.

"You were going to tell me something about Piers Evesham," she said.

His eyes looked back into hers with a certain steeliness, as though they sought to penetrate her reserve.

"I was," he said, after a moment, "though I don't suppose it will interest you very greatly. I had it from Miss Whalley, but I was not told the source of her information. Rumour says that the young man is engaged to Miss Ina Rose of Wardenhurst."

"Oh, really?" said Avery. She took the cup he offered her with a hand that was perfectly steady, though she was conscious of the fact that her face was pale. "They are abroad, I think?"

"Yes, in the Riviera." Tudor's eyes fell away from hers abruptly. "At least, they have been. Someone said they were coming home." He stopped to put wood on the fire, and there fell a silence.

Avery spoke after a moment. "No doubt he will be happier married."

"I wonder," said Tudor. "I should say myself that he has the sort of temperament that is never satisfied. He's too restless for that. I don't think Miss Ina Rose is greatly to be envied."

"Unless she loves him," said Avery. She spoke almost under her breath, her eyes upon the fire. Tudor, standing beside her with his elbow on the mantelpiece, was still conscious of that filmy veil of reserve floating between them. It chafed him, but it was too intangible a thing to tear aside.

He waited, therefore, in silence, watching her face, the tender lines of her mouth, the sweet curve that in childhood must have made a perfect picture of happiness.

She raised her eyes at length. "Doctor Tudor!"

And then she realized his scrutiny, and a soft flush rose and overspread her pale face. She lifted her straight brows questioningly.

And all in a moment Tudor found himself speaking—not of his own volition, not the words he had meant to speak, but nervously, stammeringly, giving utterance to the thoughts that suddenly welled over from his soul. "I've been wanting to speak for ages. I couldn't get it out. But it's no good keeping it in, is it? I don't get any nearer that way. I don't want to vex you, make you feel uncomfortable. No one knows better than I that I haven't much to offer. But I can give you a home and—and all my love, if you will have it. It may seem a small thing to you, but it's bigger than the calf-love of an infant like young Evesham. I know he dared to let his fancy stray your way, and you see now what it was worth. But mine—mine isn't fancy."

And there he stopped, for Avery had risen and was facing him in the firelight with eyes of troubled entreaty.

"Oh, please," she said, "please don't go on!"

He stood upright with a jerk. The distress on her face restored his normal self-command more quickly than any words. Half mechanically he reached out and took her tea-cup, setting it down on the mantelpiece before her.

"Don't be upset!" he said. "I didn't mean to upset you. I shan't go on, if it is against your wish."

"It is," said Avery. She spoke tremulously, locking her hands fast together. "It must be my own fault," she said.

"I'm dreadfully sorry. I hoped you weren't—really in earnest."

He smiled at that with a touch of cynicism. "Did you think I was amusing myself—or you? Sit down again, won't you? There is no occasion whatever for you to be distressed. I assure you that you are in no way to blame."

"I am dreadfully sorry," Avery repeated.

"That's nice of you. I had scarcely dared to flatter myself that you would be—glad. So you see, you have really nothing to reproach yourself with. I am no worse off than I was before."

She put out her hand to him with a quick, confiding gesture. "You are very kind to put it in that way. I value your friendship so much, so very much. Yes, and I value your love too. It's not a small thing to me. Only, you know—you know—" she faltered a little—"I've been married before, and—though I loved my husband—my married life was a tragedy. Oh yes, he loved me too. It wasn't that sort of misery. It was—it was drink."

"Poor girl!" said Tudor.

He spoke with unwonted gentleness, and he held her hand with the utmost kindness. There was nothing of the rejected lover in his attitude. He was man enough to give her his first sympathy.

Avery's lips were quivering. She went on with a visible effort. "He died a violent death. He was killed in a quarrel with another man. I was told it was an accident, but it didn't seem like that to me. And—it had an effect on me. It made me hard—made me bitter."

"You, Avery!" Tudor's voice was gravely incredulous.

She turned her face to the fire, and he saw on her lashes the gleam of tears. "I've never told anyone that; but it's the truth. It seemed to me that life was cruel, mainly because of men's vices. And women were created only to go under. It was a horrid sort of feeling to have, but it has never wholly left me. I don't think I could ever face marriage a second time."

"Oh, yes, you could," said Tudor quietly, "if you loved the man."

She shook her head. "I am too old to fall in love. I have somehow missed the romance of life. I know what it is, but it will never come to me now."

"And you won't marry without?" he said.

"No."

There fell a pause; then, still with the utmost quietness, he relinquished her hand. "I think you are right," he said. "Marriage without love on both sides is a ship without ballast. Yet I can't help thinking that you are mistaken in your idea that you have lost the capacity for that form of love. You may know what it is. Most women do. But I wonder if you have ever really felt it."

"Not to the full," Avery answered, her voice very low. "Then I was too young. Mine was just a child's rapture, and it was simply extinguished when I came to know the kind of burden I had to bear. It all faded so quickly, and the reality was so terribly grim. Now—now I look on the world with experienced eyes. I am too old."

"You think experience destroys romance?" said Tudor.

She looked at him. "Don't you?"

"No," he said. "If it did, I do not think you would be afraid to marry me. Don't think I am trying to persuade you! I am not. But are you sure that in refusing me you are not sacrificing substance to shadow?"

"I don't quite understand you," she said.

He shrugged his shoulders slightly. "I can't be more explicit. No doubt you will follow your own instincts. But allow me to say that I don't think you are the sort of woman to go through life unmated; and though I may not be romantic, I am sound. I think I could give you a certain measure of happiness. But the choice is yours. I can only bow to your decision."

There was a certain dignity in his speech that gave it weight. Avery listened in silence, and into silence the words passed.

Several seconds slipped away, then without effort Tudor came back to everyday things. "Sit down, won't you? Your tea is getting cold."

Avery sat down, and he handed it to her, and after a moment turned aside to the table.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I have just come back from the Vicarage."

"Oh, have you?" Avery looked round quickly. "You went to see Jeanie?"

"Yes." Tudor spoke gravely. "I also saw the Vicar.

I told him the child must go away. That cough of hers is tearing her to pieces. She ought to go to the South Coast. I told him so."

"Oh! What did he say?" Avery spoke with eagerness. She had been longing to suggest that very proposal for some time past.

Tudor smiled into his cup. "He said it was a total impossibility. That was the starting-point. At the finish it was practically decided that you should take her away next week."

"I!" said Avery.

"Yes, you. Mrs. Lorimer will manage all right now. The nurse can look after her and the little ones without assistance. And the second girl—Olive, isn't it?—can look after the Reverend Stephen. It's all arranged, in fact, unless it fails to meet with your approval, in which case, of course, the whole business must be reconsidered."

"But of course I approve," Avery said. "I would do anything that lay in my power. But I don't quite like the idea of leaving Mrs. Lorimer."

"She will be all right," Tudor asserted again. "She wouldn't be happy away from her precious husband, and she would sooner have you looking after Jeanie than anyone. She told me so."

"She always thinks of others first," said Avery.

"So does someone else I know," rejoined Tudor. "It's just a habit some women have—not always a good habit from some points of view. We may regard it as settled, then, may we? You really have no objections to raise?"

"None," said Avery. "I think the idea is excellent. I have been feeling troubled about Jeanie nearly all the winter. This last cold has worn her out terribly."

Tudor nodded. "Yes."

He drank his tea thoughtfully, and then spoke again. "I sounded her this afternoon. The left lung is not in a healthy condition. She will need all the attention you can give her if she is going to throw off the mischief. It has not gone very far at present; but—to be frank with you—I am very far from satisfied that she can muster the strength." He got up and began to pace the room. "I have not said this plainly to anyone else. I don't want to frighten Mrs. Lorimer before I need. The poor soul has enough to bear without

this added. Possibly the change will work wonders. Possibly she will pull round. Children have marvellous recuperative powers. But I have seen this sort of thing a good many times before, and "—he came back to the hearth —" it doesn't make me happy."

"I am glad you have told me," Avery said.

"I had to tell you. I believe you more than half suspected it." Tudor spoke restlessly; his thoughts were evidently not of his companion at that moment. "There are, of course, a good many points in her favour. She is a good, obedient child, with a placid temperament. And the summer is before us. We shall have to work hard this summer, Mrs. Denys." He smiled at her abruptly. "It is like building a sea-wall when the tide is out. We've got to make it as strong as possible before the tide comes back."

"You may rely on me to do my very best," Avery said earnestly.

He nodded. "Thank you. I know I may. I always do. Hence my confidence in you. May I give you some more tea?"

He quitted the subject as suddenly as he had embarked upon it. There was something very friendly in his treatment of her. She knew with unquestioning intuition that for the future he would keep strictly within the bounds of friendship unless he had her permission to pass beyond them. And it was this knowledge that emboldened her at parting to say, with her hand in his: "You are very, very good to me. I would like to thank you, if I could."

He pressed her hand with the kindness of an old friend. "No, don't thank me!" he said, smiling at her in a way that somehow went to her heart. "I shall always be at your service. But I'd rather you took it as a matter of course. I feel more comfortable that way."

Avery left him at length and trudged home through the mud with a curious feeling of uncertainty in her soul. It was as though she had been vouchsafed a far glimpse of destiny which had been too fleeting for her comprehension.

CHAPTER XXVII

SHADOW

THE preparations that must inevitably precede a departure for an indefinite length of time kept Avery from dwelling overmuch on what had passed on that gusty afternoon when she had taken shelter in the doctor's house.

Whether or not she believed the rumour concerning Piers she scarcely asked herself. For some reason into which she did not enter she was firmly resolved to exclude him from her mind, and she welcomed the many occupations that kept her thoughts engrossed. No word from him had reached her since that daring letter written nearly three months before, just after his departure. It seemed that he had accepted her answer just as she had meant him to accept it, and that he had nothing more to say. So, at least, she viewed the matter, not suffering any inward question to arise.

She saw Lennox Tudor several times before the last day arrived. He did not seek her out. It simply came about in the ordinary course of things. He was plainly determined that neither in public nor private should there be any secret sense of embarrassment between them. And for this also she was grateful, liking him for his blunt consideration for her better than she had ever liked him before.

It was on the evening of the day preceding her departure with Jeanie that she ran down in the dusk to the post at the end of the lane with a letter. Her Australian friend had written to propose a visit, and she had been obliged to put him off.

There was a bitter wind blowing, but she hastened along hatless, with a cloak thrown round her shoulders. Past the church, with its sheltering yew trees she ran, intent only upon executing her errand in as short a time as possible.

Her hair blew loose about her face, and before she reached her goal, she was ashamed of her untidiness; but it was not worth while to return for a hat, and she pressed on with a girl's impetuosity, hoping that she would meet no one.

The hope was not to be fulfilled. She reached the box and deposited her letter therein; but as she turned from doing so, there came the fall of a horse's hoofs along the road at the end of the lane.

She caught the sound, and was pierced by a sudden, quite unaccountable suspicion. Swiftly she gathered her cloak more securely about her, and hastened away.

Instantly it seemed to her that the hoof-beats quickened. The lane was steep, and she realized in a moment that if the rider turned up in her wake, she must very speedily be overtaken. She slackened her pace, therefore, and walked on more quietly, straining her ears to listen, not venturing to look back.

Round the corner came the advancing animal at a brisk trot. She had known in her heart that it would be so. She had known from the first moment of hearing those hoof-beats that Fate, strong and relentless, was on her track.

How she had known it she could not have said, but the wild clamour of her heart stifled any reasoning that she might have tried to form. Her breath came and went like the breath of a hunted creature. She could not hurry because of the trembling of her knees. Every instinct was urging her to flee, but she lacked the strength. She drew instead nearer to the wall, hoping against hope that in the gathering darkness he would pass her by.

Nearer and nearer came the hammering hoofs. She could hear the horse's sharp breathing, the creak of leather. And then suddenly she found she could go no further. She stopped and leaned against the wall.

She saw the animal pulled suddenly in, and knew that she was caught. With a great effort she lifted a smiling face, and simulated surprise.

"You! How do you do?"

"You knew it was me," said Piers rather curtly.

He dropped from the saddle with the easy grace that always marked his movements, and came to her, leaving the animal free.

"Why were you running away from me?" he said. "Did you want to cut me?"

He must have felt the trembling of her hand, for all in a moment his manner changed. His fingers closed upon hers with warm assurance. He suddenly laughed into her face.

"Don't answer either of those questions!" he said. "Didn't you expect to see me? We came home yesterday thank the gods! I'm deadly sick of being away."

"Haven't you enjoyed yourself?" Avery managed to ask.

He laughed again somewhat grimly. "I wasn't out for enjoyment. I've been—amusing myself more or less. But that's not the same thing, is it? I should have drowned myself if I'd stayed out there much longer."

"Don't talk nonsense!" said Avery.

She spoke with a touch of sharpness. Her agitation had passed, leaving her vexed with herself and with him.

He received the admonition with a grimace. "Have you heard about my engagement yet?" he inquired irrelevantly after a moment.

Avery looked at him very steadily through the falling dusk. She had a feeling that he was trying to hoodwink her by some means not wholly praiseworthy.

"Are you engaged?" she asked him point-blank.

He made a careless gesture. "Everybody says so."

"Are you engaged?" Avery repeated with resolution.

She freed her hand as she uttered the question the second time. She was standing up very straight against the churchyard wall, sternly determined to check all trifling.

Piers straightened himself also. From the pride of his attitude she thought that he was about to take offence, but his voice held none as he made reply:

"I am not."

She felt as if some constriction at her heart, of which till that moment she had scarcely been aware, had suddenly slackened. She drew a long, deep breath.

"Sorry—what?" suggested Piers.

He began to tap a careless tattoo with his whip on the toe of his boot. He did not appear to be regarding her very closely. Yet she did not feel at her ease. That sudden sense as of strain relaxed had left her curiously unsteady.

She ignored his question and asked another. "Why is everybody saying that you are engaged?"

He lifted his shoulders. "Because everybody is more or less of a gossiping fool, I should say. Still," he threw up his head with a laugh, "notions of that sort have their uses. My grandfather, for instance, is firmly of the opinion that I have come home to be married. I didn't undeceive him."

"You let him believe—what wasn't true?" said Avery slowly.

He looked straight at her, with his head flung back. "I did. It suited my purpose. I wanted to get home. He thought it was because the Roses had returned to Wardenhurst. I let him think so. It certainly was deadly without them."

It was then that Avery turned and began quietly to walk on up the hill. He linked his arm in Pompey's bridle, and walked beside her.

She spoke after a few moments with something of constraint. "And how have you been—amusing yourself?"

"I?" carelessly he made reply. "I have been playing around with Ina Rose chiefly—to save us both from boredom."

There sounded a faint jeering note behind the carelessness of his voice. Avery quickened her pace almost unconsciously.

"It's all right," said Piers. "There's been no damage done."

"You don't know that," said Avery, without looking at him.

"Yes, I do. She'll marry Dick Guyes. I told her she would the night before they left, and she didn't say she wouldn't. He's a much better chap than I am, you know," said Piers, with an odd touch of sincerity. "And he's head over ears in love with her into the bargain."

"Are you trying to excuse yourself?" said Avery.

He laughed. "What for? For not marrying Ina Rose? I assure you I never meant to marry her."

"For trifling with her." Avery's voice was hard, but he affected not to notice.

"A game's a game," he said lightly.

Avery stopped very suddenly and faced round upon him. "That sort of game," she said, and her voice throbbed with the intensity of her indignation, "is monstrous—is contemptible—a game that none but blackguards ever stoop to play!"

Piers stood still. "Great Scot!" he said softly.

Avery swept on. Once roused, she was ruthless in her arraignment.

"Men—some men—find it amusing to go through life breaking women's hearts just for the sport of the thing.

They regard it as a pastime, in the same light as fox-hunting or cards or racing. And when the game is over, they laugh among themselves and say what fools women are. And so they may be, and so they are, many of them. But is it honourable, is it manly, to take advantage of their weakness? I never thought you were that sort. I thought you were at least honest."

"Did you?" said Piers.

He was holding himself very straight and stiff, just as he had held himself on that day in the winter when she had so indignantly intervened to save his dog from his ungovernable fury. But he did not seem to resent her attack, and in spite of herself Avery's own resentment began to wane. She suddenly remembered that her very protest was an admission of intimacy of which he would not scruple to avail himself if it suited his purpose, and with this thought in her mind she paused in confusion.

"Won't you finish?" said Piers.

She turned to leave him. "That's all I have to say."

He put out a restraining hand. "Then may I say something?"

The request was so humbly uttered that she could not refuse it. She remained where she was.

"I should like you to know," said Piers, "that I have never given Miss Rose or any other girl with whom I have flirted the faintest shadow of a reason for believing that I was in earnest. That is the truth—on my honour."

"I wonder if—they—would say the same?" said Avery.

He shrugged his shoulders. "No one ever before accused me of being a lady-killer. As to your other charge against me, it was not I who deceived my grandfather. It was he who deceived himself."

"Isn't that a distinction without a difference?" said Avery, in a low voice.

She was beginning to wish that she had not spoken with such vehemence. After all, what were his delinquencies to her? She almost expected him to ask the question; but he did not.

"Do you mind explaining?" he said.

With an effort she made response. "You can't say it was honourable to let your grandfather come home in the belief that you wanted to become engaged to Miss Rose."

"Have I said so?" said Piers.

Avery paused. She had a sudden feeling of uncertainty, as if he had kicked away a foothold upon which she had rashly attempted to rest.

"You admit that it was not?" she said.

He smiled a little. "I admit that it was not strictly honest, but I didn't see much harm in it. In any case, it was high time we came home, and it gave him the impetus to move."

"And when are you going to tell him the truth?" said Avery.

Piers was silent.

Looking at him through the dusk, she was aware of a change in his demeanour, though as to its nature she was slightly doubtful.

"And if I don't tell him?" said Piers at length.

"You will," she said quickly.

"I don't know why I should." Piers' voice was dogged. "He'll know fast enough—when she gets engaged to Guyes."

"Know that you have played a double game," said Avery.

"Well?" he said. "And if he does?"

"I think you will be sorry—then," she said.

Somehow she could not be angry any longer. He had accepted her rebuke in so docile a spirit. She did not wholly understand his attitude. Yet it softened her.

"Why should I be sorry?" said Piers.

She answered him quickly and impulsively. "Because it isn't your nature to deceive. You are too honest at heart to do it and be happy."

"Happy!" said Piers, an odd note of emotion in his voice. "Do you suppose I'm ever that—or ever likely to be?"

She recoiled a little from the suppressed vehemence of his tone, but almost instantly he put out his hand again to her with a gesture of boyish persuasion.

"Don't rag me, Avery! I've had a filthy time lately. And when I saw you cut and run at sight of me—I just couldn't stand it. I've been wanting to answer your letter, but I couldn't."

"But why should you?" Avery broke in gently. "My letter was the answer to yours."

She gave him her hand, because she could not help it.

He held it in a hungry clasp. "I know—I know," he said

rather incoherently. "It—it was very decent of you not to be angry. I believe I let myself go rather—what? Thanks awfully for being so sweet about it!"

"My dear boy," Avery said, "you thank me for nothing! The matter is past. Don't let us reopen it!"

She spoke with unconscious appeal. His hand squeezed hers in instant response. "All right. We won't. And look here—if you want me to tell my grandfather that he has been building his castle in the air—it'll mean a row of course, but—I'll do it."

"Will you?" said Avery.

He nodded. "Yes—as you wish it. And may I come to tea with Jeanie to-morrow?"

His dark eyes smiled suddenly into hers as he dropped her hand. She had a momentary feeling of uncertainty as she met them—a sense of doubt that disquieted her strangely. It was as if he had softly closed a door against her somewhere in his soul.

With a curious embarrassment she answered him: "Jeanie has not been well all the winter. Doctor Tudor has ordered a change, and we are going—she and I—to Stanbury Cliffs to-morrow."

"Are you, though?" He opened his eyes. "Just you and she, eh? What a cosy party!"

"The other children will probably join us for the Easter holidays," Avery said. "It's a nice place, they say. Do you know it?"

"I should think I do. Victor and I used to go there regularly when I was a kid. It was there I learnt to swim."

"Who is Victor?" asked Avery, beginning to walk on up the hill.

"Victor? Oh, he's my French nurse—the best chap who ever walked. We are great pals," laughed Piers. "And so you're off to-morrow, are you? Hope you'll have a good time. Give my love to the kiddie! She isn't really ill—what?"

"Doctor Tudor is not satisfied about her," Avery said.

"Oh, Tudor!" Piers spoke with instant disparagement. "I don't suppose he's any good. What does he say anyway?"

"He is afraid of lung trouble," Avery said. "But we hope the change is going to do wonders for her. Do you

know, I think I must run in now. I have several little jobs still to get through this evening."

Piers stopped at once. "Good-bye!" he said. "I'm glad I saw you. Take care of yourself, Avery! And next time you see me coming—don't run away!"

He set his foot in the stirrup and swung himself up into the saddle. Pompey immediately began to execute an elaborate dance in the roadway, rendering further conversation out of the question. Piers waved his cap in careless adieu, and turned the animal round. In another moment he was tearing down the lane at a gallop, and Avery was left looking after him, still with that curious sense of doubt lying cold at her heart.

The sight of a black, clerical figure emerging from the churchyard caused her to turn swiftly and pursue her way to the Vicarage gate. But the sounds of those galloping hoofs still wrought within her as she went. They beat upon her spirit with a sense of swift-moving Destiny.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE EVESHAM DEVIL

"CONFOUND the boy!" said Sir Beverley.

He rose up from the black oak settle in the hall with a jerky movement of irritation, and tramped to the front door.

It had been one of those strange, soft days that sometimes come in the midst of blustering March storms, and though the sun had long gone down the warmth still lingered. It might have been an evening in May.

He opened the great door with an impatient hand. What on earth was the boy doing? Had he gone love-making to Wardenhurst? A grim smile touched the old man's grim lips as this thought occurred to him. That he was not wasting his time nearer home he was fairly convinced; for only that morning he had heard from Lennox Tudor that the mother's help at the Vicarage, over whom in the winter Piers had been inclined to make a fool of himself, had taken one of the children away for a change. It seemed more than probable by this time that Piers' wandering fancy had

wholly ceased to stray in her direction, but the news of her absence had caused Sir Beverley undoubted satisfaction. He hoped his boy would not encounter that impertinent, scheming woman again until he was safely engaged to Ina Rose. That this engagement was imminent Sir Beverley was fully convinced. His only wonder was that it had not taken place sooner. The two had been thrown together almost daily during the sojourn of Colonel Rose and his daughter at Mentone, and they had always seemed to enjoy each other's society. Of course, Sir Beverley did not like the girl. He actively disliked the whole female species. But she belonged to the county, and she seemed, moreover, to be a normal, healthy young woman, who would be the mother of normal, healthy children. And this was the sort of wife Piers wanted. For Piers—drat the boy!—was not normal. He inherited a good deal of his Italian grandmother's temperament as well as her beauty. And life was not likely to be a very easy matter for him in consequence.

But an ordinary young English wife of his own rank would be a step in the right direction. So reasoned Sir Beverley, who had taken that fatal step in the wrong one in his youth and had never recovered the ground thus lost.

Standing there at the open door, he dwelt upon his boy's future with a kind of grim pleasure that was not unmixed with heartache. He and his wife would have to go and live at the Dower House, of course. No feminine truck at the Abbey for him! But the lad should continue to manage the estate with him. That would bring them in contact every day. He couldn't do without that much. The evenings would be lonely enough. He pictured the long, silent dinners with a weary frown. How infernally lonely the Abbey could be!

The steady tick of the clock in the corner forced itself upon his notice. He swore at it under his breath, and went out upon the steps.

At the same instant a view-holloa from the dark avenue greeted him, and in spite of himself his face softened.

"Hullo, you rascal!" he shouted back. "What the devil are you up to?"

Piers came running up, light-footed and alert. "I've been unlucky," he explained. "Had two punctures. I

left the car at the garage and came on as quickly as I could. I say, I'm awfully sorry. I've been with Dick Guyes."

Sir Beverley growled inarticulately, and turned inwards. So he had not been to the Roses', after all!

"Get along with you!" he said. "And dress as fast as you can!"

And Piers bounded past him and went up the stairs in three great leaps. He seemed to have grown younger during the few days that had elapsed since their return, more ardent, more keenly alive. The English spring seemed to exhilarate him; but for the first time Sir Beverley began to have his doubts as to the reason for his evident pleasure in returning. What on earth had he been to see Guyes for? Guyes of all people—who was well known as one of Miss Ina's most devoted adorers!

It was evident that the news he desired to hear would not be imparted to him that night, and Sir Beverley considered himself somewhat aggrieved in consequence. He was decidedly short with Piers when he reappeared—a fact which in no way disturbed his grandson's equanimity. He talked cheery commonplaces throughout dinner without effort, regardless of Sir Beverley's discouraging attitude, and it was not till dessert was placed upon the table that he allowed his conversational energies to flag.

Then, indeed, as David finally and ceremoniously withdrew, did he suddenly seem to awake to the fact that conversation was no longer a vital necessity, and forthwith dropped into an abrupt, uncompromising silence.

It lasted for a space of minutes, during which neither of them stirred or uttered a syllable, becoming at length ominous as the electric stillness before the storm.

They came through it characteristically, Sir Beverley staring fixedly before him under the frown that was seldom wholly absent from his face; Piers, steady-eyed and intent, keenly watching the futile agonies of a night-moth among the candles. There was about him a massive, statuesque look in vivid contrast to the pulsing vitality of a few minutes before.

It was Sir Beverley who broke the silence at last with a species of inarticulate snarl peculiarly his own. Piers' dark eyes were instantly upon him, but he said nothing, merely waiting for the words to which this sound was the preface.

Sir Beverley's brow was thunderous. He looked back at Piers with a piercing grim regard.

"Well?" he said. "What fool idea have you got in your brain now? I suppose I've got to hear it sooner or later."

It was not a conciliatory speech, yet Piers received it with no visible resentment. "I don't know that I want to say anything very special," he said, after a moment's thought.

"Oh, don't you?" growled Sir Beverley. "Then what are you thinking about? Tell me that!"

Piers leaned back in his chair. "I was thinking about Dick Guyes," he said. "He is dining at the Roses' to-night."

"Oh!" said Sir Beverley shortly.

A faint smile came at the corners of Piers' mouth. "He wants to propose to Ina for about the hundred and ninetieth time," he said, "but doesn't know if he can screw himself up to it. I told him not to be such a shy ass. She is only waiting for him to speak."

"Eh?" said Sir Beverley.

A queer little dancing gleam leaped up in Piers' eyes—the gleam that had invariably heralded some piece of especial devilry in the days of his boyhood.

"I told him she was his for the asking, sir," he said coolly, "and promised not to flirt with her any more till they were safely married."

"Damn you!" exclaimed Sir Beverley violently and without warning.

He had a glass of wine in front of him, and with the words his fingers gripped the stem. In another second he would have hurled the liquid full in Piers' face; but Piers was too quick for him. Quick as lightning, his own hand shot out across the corner of the table and grasped the old man's wrist.

"No, sir! No!" he said sternly.

They glared into each other's eyes, and Sir Beverley uttered a furious oath; but after the first instinctive effort to free himself he did no more.

At the end of possibly thirty seconds Piers took his hand away. He pushed back his chair in the same movement and rose.

"Shall we talk in the library?" he said. "This room is hot."

Sir Beverley raised the wineglass to his lips with a hand that shook, and drained it deliberately.

"Yes," he said then. "We will—talk in the library."

He got up with an agility that he seldom displayed, and turned to the door. As he went he glanced up suddenly at the softly mocking face on the wall, and a sharp spasm contracted his harsh features. But he scarcely paused. Without further words he left the room; and Piers followed, light of tread, behind him.

The study windows stood wide open to the night. Piers crossed the room and quietly closed them. Then, without haste and without hesitation, he came to the table and stopped before it.

"I never intended to marry Ina Rose," he said. "I was only amusing myself—and her."

"The devil you were!" ejaculated Sir Beverley.

Piers went on with the utmost steadiness: "We are not in the least suited to one another, and we have the sense to realize it. The next time Guyes asks her, I believe she will have him."

"Sense!" roared Sir Beverley. "Do you dare to talk to me of sense, you—you blind fool? Mighty lot of sense you can boast of! And what the devil does it matter whether you suit one another—as you call it—or not, so long as you keep the whip-hand? You'll tell me next that you're not—in love with her, I suppose?"

The bitterness of the last words seemed to shake him from head to foot. He looked at Piers with the memory of a past torment in his eyes. And because of it Piers turned away his own.

"It's quite true, sir," he said, in a low voice. "I am not—in love with her. I never have been."

Sir Beverley's fist crashed down upon the table. "Love!" he thundered. "Love! Do you want to make me sick? I tell you, sir, I would sooner see you in your coffin than married to a woman with whom you imagined yourself in love. Oh, I know what you have in your mind. I've known for a long time. You're caught in the toils of that stiff-necked, scheming Judy at the Vicarage, who——"

"Sir!" blazed forth Piers.

He leaned across the table with a face gone suddenly white, and struck his own fist upon the polished oak with a passionate force that compelled attention.

Sir Beverley ceased his tirade in momentary astonishment. Such violence from Piers was unusual.

Instantly Piers went on speaking, his voice quick and low, quivering with the agitation that he had no time to subdue. "I won't hear another word on that subject! You hear me, sir? Not one word! It is sacred, and as such I will have it treated."

But the check upon Sir Beverley was but brief, and the flame of his anger burned all the more fiercely in consequence of it. He broke in upon those few desperate words of Piers' with redoubled fury.

"You will have this, and you won't have that! Confound you! What the devil do you mean? Are you master in this house, or am I?"

"I am master where my own actions are concerned," threw back Piers. "And what I do—what I decide to do—is my affair alone."

Swiftly he uttered the words. His breathing came quick and short as the breathing of a man hard pressed. He seemed to be holding back every straining nerve with a blind force that was physical rather than mental.

He drew himself suddenly erect as he spoke. He had flung down the gauntlet of his independence at last, and with clenched hands he waited for the answer to his challenge.

It came upon him like a whirlwind. Sir Beverley uttered an oath that fell with the violence of a blow, and after it a tornado of furious speech against which it was futile to attempt to raise any protest. He could only stand as it were at bay, like an animal protecting its own, fiery-veined, quivering, yet holding back from the spring.

Not for any insult to himself would he quit that attitude. He was striving desperately to keep his self-control. He had been within an ace of losing it, as the blood that oozed over his closed fist testified; but, for the sake of that manhood which he was seeking to assert, he made a Titanic effort to command himself.

And Sir Beverley, feeling the dumb strength that opposed him, resenting the forbearance with which he was confronted, infuriated by the unexpected force of the boy's resistance, turned with a snarl to seize and desecrate that which he had been warned was holy.

"As for this designing woman, I tell you, she is not for you—not, that is, in any honourable sense. If you choose to make a fool of her, that's your affair. I suppose you'll

sow the usual crop of wild oats before you've done. But as to marrying her——"

"By God, sir!" broke in Piers passionately. "Do you imagine that I propose to do anything else?"

The words came from him like a cry wrung from a man in torture, and as he uttered them the last of his self-control slipped from his grasp. With a face gone suddenly devilish, he strode round the table and stood before his grandfather, furiously threatening.

"I have warned you!" he said, and his voice was low, sunk almost to a whisper. "You can say what you like of me. I'm used to it. But—if you speak evil of her—I'll treat you as I would any other blackguard who dared to insult her. And now that we are on the subject, I will tell you this. If I do not marry this woman whom I love—I swear that I will never marry at all! That is my final word!"

He hurled the last sentence in Sir Beverley's face, and with it he would have swung round upon his heel; but something in that face detained him.

Sir Beverley's eyes were shining with an icy, intolerable sparkle. His thin lips were drawn in the dreadful semblance of a smile. He was half a head taller than Piers, and he seemed to tower above him in that moment of conflict.

"Wait a minute!" he said. "Wait a minute!"

His right hand was feeling along the leathern surface of the writing-table, but neither his eyes nor Piers' followed the movement. They held each other in a fixed, unalterable glare.

There followed several moments of complete and terrible silence—a silence more fraught with violence than any speech.

Then, with a slight jerk, Sir Beverley leaned towards Piers. "So," he said, "you defy me, do you?"

His voice was as grim as his look. A sudden, odd sense of fear went through Piers. Sharply the thought ran through his mind that the same Evesham devil possessed them both. It was as if he had caught a glimpse of the monster gibing at his elbow, goading him, goading them both.

He made a sharp, involuntary movement; he almost flinched from those pitiless, stony eyes.

"Ha!" Sir Beverley uttered a brief and very bitter laugh. "You've begun to think better of it, eh?"

"No, sir," curtly Piers made answer, speaking because

he must. "I meant what I said, and I shall stick to it. But it wasn't for the sake of defying you that I said it. I have a better reason than that."

He was still quivering with anger, yet because of that gibing devil at his elbow he strove to speak temperately, strove to hold back the raging flood of fierce resentment that threatened to overwhelm him.

As for Sir Beverley, he had never attempted to control himself in moments such as these, and he did not attempt to do so now. Before Piers' words were fairly uttered, he had raised his right hand, and in it a stout, two-foot ruler that he had taken from the writing-table.

"Take that, then, you young dog!" he shouted, and struck Piers furiously, as he stood. "And that! And that!"

The third blow never fell. It was caught in mid-air by Piers, who, with eyes that literally flamed in his white face, sprang straight at his grandfather, and closed with him.

There was a brief—a very brief—struggle, then a gasping oath from Sir Beverley as the ruler was torn from his grasp. The next moment he was free and tottering blindly. Piers, with an awful smile, swung the weapon back as if he would strike him down with it. Then, as Sir Beverley clutched instinctively at the nearest chair for support, he flung savagely round on his heel, altering his purpose. There followed the loud crack of rending wood as he broke the ruler passionately across his knee, putting forth all his strength; and the clatter of the falling fragments as he hurled them violently from him.

And then in a silence more dreadful than any speech, he strode to the door and went out, crashing it furiously shut behind him.

Sir Beverley, grown piteously feeble, sank down in the chair, and remained there huddled and gasping for many dragging minutes.

CHAPTER XXIX

A WATCH IN THE NIGHT

He came at last out of what had almost been a stupor of inertia, sat slowly up, turned his brooding eyes upon the door through which Piers had passed. A tremor

of anger crossed his face and was gone. A grim smile took its place. He still panted spasmodically; but he found his voice.

"Egad!" he said. "The fellow's as strong as a young bear. He's hugged—all the wind—out of my vitæ."

He struggled to his feet, straightening his knees with difficulty, one hand pressed hard to his labouring heart.

"Egad!" he gasped again. "He's getting out of hand—the cub! But he'll come to heel—he'll come to heel! I know the rascal!"

He stumbled to the bell and rang it.

David appeared with a promptitude that seemed to indicate a certain uneasiness.

"Coffee!" growled his master. "And liqueur!"

David departed at as high a rate of speed as decorum would permit.

During his absence Sir Beverley set himself rigidly to recover his normal demeanour. The encounter had shaken him, shaken him badly; but he was not the man to yield to physical weakness. He fought it with angry determination.

Before David's reappearance he had succeeded in controlling his gasping breath, though the hand with which he helped himself shook very perceptibly.

There were two cups on the tray. David lingered.

"You can go," said Sir Beverley.

David cocked one eyebrow in deferential inquiry. "Master Piers in the garden, sir?" he ventured. "Shall I find him?"

"No!" snapped Sir Beverley.

"Very good, sir." David turned regretfully to the door. "Shall I keep the coffee hot, Sir Beverley?" he asked, as he reached it, with what was almost a pleading note in his voice.

Sir Beverley's frown became as menacing as a thundercloud. "No!" he shouted.

David nodded in melancholy submission and withdrew.

Sir Beverley sat down heavily in his chair and slowly drank his coffee. Finally he put aside the empty cup and sat staring at the closed door, his brows drawn heavily together.

How had the young beggar dared to defy him so? He must have been getting out of hand for some time by imper-

ceptible degrees. He had always vowed to himself that he would not spoil the boy. Had that resolution of his become gradually relaxed? His frown grew heavier. He had never before contemplated the possibility that Piers might some day become an individual force utterly beyond his control.

His eye fell upon a fragment of the broken ruler lying under the table, and again grimly he smiled.

"Confound the scamp! He's got some muscle," he murmured.

Again his look went to the door. Why didn't the young fool come back and apologise? How much longer did he mean to keep him waiting?

The minutes dragged away, and the silence of emptiness gathered and brooded in the great room and about the master of the house who sat within it, with bent head, waiting.

It was close upon ten o'clock when at length he rose and irritably rang the bell.

"See if you can find Master Piers," he said to David. "He can't be far away. Look in the drawing-room! Look in the garden! Tell him I want him!"

David withdrew upon the errand, and again the oppressive silence drew close. For a long interval Sir Beverley sat quite motionless, still staring at the door as though he expected Piers to enter at any moment. But when at length it opened, it was only to admit David once more.

"I'm sorry to say I can't find Master Piers anywhere in the house or garden, Sir Beverley," he said, looking straight before him and blinking vacantly at the lamp. "I'm inclined to believe, sir, that he must have gone into the park."

Sir Beverley snarled inarticulately and dismissed him.

During the hour that followed he did not move from his chair, and scarcely changed his position. But at last, as the stable clock was tolling eleven, he rose stiffly and walked to the window. It was fastened; he dragged at the catch with impatient fingers.

His face was haggard and grey as he finally thrust up the sash, and leaned out with his hands on the sill.

The night was very still all about him. It might have been a night in June. Only very far away a faint breeze was stirring, whispering furtively in the bare boughs of the elm trees that bordered the park. Overhead the stars shone dimly behind a floating veil of mist, and from the garden

sleeping at his feet there arose a faint, fugitive scent of violets.

The old man's face contracted as at some sudden sense of pain as that scent reached his nostrils. His mouth twitched with a curious tremor, and he covered it with his hand as though he feared some silent watcher in that sleeping world might see and mock his weakness. That violet-bed beneath the window had been planted fifty years before at the whim of a woman.

"We must have a great many violets," she had said. "They are sweeter than all the roses in the world. Next year I must have handfuls and handfuls of sweetness."

And the next year the violets had bloomed in the chosen corner, but her hands had not gathered them. And they had offered their magic ever since, year after year—even as they offered it to-night—to a heart that was too old and too broken to care.

Fifty years before Sir Beverley had stood at that same window, waiting and listening in the spring twilight for the beloved footfall of the woman who was never again to enter his house. They had had a disagreement; he had spoken harshly, he had been foolishly, absurdly jealous; for her wonderful beauty, her quick, foreign charm drew all the world. But, returning from a long ride that had lasted all day, he had entered with the desire to make amends, to win her sweet and gracious forgiveness. She had forgiven him before. She had laughed with a sweet, elusive mockery and passed the matter by as of no importance. It had seemed a foregone conclusion that she would forgive him again, would reassure him, and set his mind at rest. But he had come back to an empty house—every door gaping wide and the beloved presence gone.

So he had waited for her, expecting her every moment, refusing to believe the truth that, nevertheless, had forced itself upon him at the last. So now he waited for her grandson—the boy with her beauty, her quick and generous charm, her passionate, emotional nature—to come back to him. And yet again he waited in vain.

Piers had gone forth in fierce anger, driven by that devil that had descended to him through generations of stiff-necked ancestors; and for the first time in all his hot, young life he had not returned repentant.

"I treated him like a dog, egad!" murmured Sir Beverley into the shielding hand. "But he'll come back. He always comes back, the scamp."

But the minutes crawled by, the night-wind rustled and passed, and still Piers did not come.

It was hard on midnight when Sir Beverley suddenly raised both hands to his mouth and sent a shrill, peculiar whistle through them across the quiet garden. It had been his special call for Piers in his childhood. Even as he sent it out into the darkness, he seemed to see the sturdy, eager little figure that had never failed to answer that summons with delight racing headlong towards him over the dim, dewy lawn.

But to-night it brought no answer, though he repeated it again and yet again; and as twelve o'clock struck heavily upon the stillness he turned from the window and groaned aloud. The boy had gone—gone for good, as he might have known he would go. He had driven him forth with blows and bitter words, and it was out of his power to bring him back again.

Slowly he crossed the room and rang the bell. He was very cold, and he shivered as he moved.

It was Victor who answered the summons—Victor with round, vindictive eyes, that openly accused him for a moment, and then softened inexplicably and looked elsewhere.

"You ask me for *Monsieur Pierre?*" he said, spreading out his hands. "*Mais*——"

"I didn't ask for anything," growled Sir Beverley. "I rang the bell to tell you and all the other fools to lock up and go to bed."

"But—me!" ejaculated Victor, rolling his eyes upwards n astonishment.

"Yes, you! Where's the sense of your sitting up? Master Piers knows how to undress himself by this time, I suppose?"

Sir Beverley scowled at him aggressively, but Victor did not even see the scowl. Like a hen with one chick, and that gone astray, he could think of naught beside.

"*Mais Monsieur Pierre* is not here! Where then is *Monsieur Pierre?*" he questioned in distress.

"How the devil should I know?" snarled Sir Beverley. "Stop your chatter and be off with you! Shut the window

first, and then go and tell David to lock up! I shan't want anything more to-night."

Victor shrugged his shoulders in mute protest, and went to the window. Here he paused, looking forth with eyes of eager searching till recalled to his duty by a growl of impatience from his master. Then with a celerity remarkable in one of his years and rotundity, he quickly popped in his head and closed the window.

"Leave the blind!" ordered Sir Beverley. "And the catch too! There! Now go! *Allez-vous-en!* Don't let me see you again to-night!"

Victor threw a single shrewd glance at the drawn face, and trotted with a woman's nimbleness to the door. Here he paused, executed a stiff bow; then wheeled and departed. The door closed noiselessly behind him, and again Sir Beverley was left alone.

He dragged a chair to the window, and sat down to watch. Doubtless the boy would return when he had walked off his indignation. He would be sure to see the light in the study, and he would come to him for admittance. He himself would receive him with a gruff word or two of admonition and the whole affair should be dismissed. Grimly he pictured the scene to himself as, ignoring the anxiety that was growing within him, he settled himself to his lonely vigil.

Slowly the night dragged on. A couple of owls were hooting to one another across the garden, and far away a dog barked at intervals. Old Sir Beverley never stirred in his chair. His limbs were rigid, his eyes fixed and watchful. But his face was grey—grey and stricken and incredibly old. He had the look of a man who carried a burden too heavy to be borne.

One after another he heard the hours strike, but his position never altered, his eyes never varied, his face remained as though carved in granite—a graven image of despair. Unspeakable weariness was in his pose, and yet he did not relax or yield a hair's-breadth to the body's importunity. He suffered too bitterly in the spirit that night to be aware of physical necessity.

Slowly the long hours passed. The night began to wane. A faint grey glimmer, scarcely perceptible, came down from a mist-veiled sky. The wind that had sunk to stillness came softly back and wandered to and fro as though to rouse the

sleeping world. Behind the mist the stars went out, and from the rookery in the park a hoarse voice suddenly proclaimed the coming day.

The grey light grew. In the garden ghostly shapes arose, phantoms of the dawn that gradually resolved into familiar forms of tree and shrub. From the rookery there swelled a din of many raucous voices. The dog in the distance began to bark again with feverish zest, and from the stables came Cæsar's cheery answering yell.

The mist drifted away from the face of the sky. A brightness was growing there. Stiffly, painfully, Sir Beverley struggled up from his chair, stood steadying himself—a figure tragic and forlorn—with his hands against the wood of the window-frame, then with a groaning effort, thrust up the sash.

Violets! Violets! The haunting scent of them rose to greet him. The air was full of their magic fragrance. For a second he was aware of it; he almost winced. And then in a moment he had forgotten. He stood there motionless—a desolate old man, bowed and shrunken and grey—staring blindly out before him, unconscious of all things save the despair that had settled in his heart.

The night had passed and his boy had not returned.

CHAPTER XXX

THE CONFLICT

STANBURY CLIFFS was no more than a little fishing-town at the foot of the sandy cliff—a sheltered nest of a place in which the sound of the waves was heard all day long, but which no bitter wind could reach. The peace of it was balm to Avery's spirit. She revelled in its quiet.

Jeanie loved it too. She delighted in the freedom and the warmth, and almost from the day of their arrival her health began to improve.

They had their quarters in what was little more than a two-storied cottage belonging to one of the fishermen, and there was only a tiny garden, bright with marigolds, between them and the shore. Day after day they went through the little wicket gate down a slope of loose sand to the golden

beach, where they spent the sunny hours in perfect happiness. The waves that came into the bay were never very rough, though they sometimes heard them raging outside with a fury that filled the whole world with its roaring. Jeanie called it "the desired haven," and confided to Avery that she was happier than she had ever been in her life before.

Avery was happy too, but with a difference; for she knew in her secret heart that the days of her tranquillity were numbered. She knew with a woman's sure instinct that the interval of peace would be but brief, that with or without her will she must soon be drawn back again into the storm and stress of life. And knowing it, she waited, strengthening her defences day by day, counting each day as a respite, while she devoted herself to the child, and rejoiced to see the change so quickly wrought in her. Tudor's simile of the building of a sea-wall often recurred to her. She told herself that the foundation thereof should be as secure as human care could make it, so that when the tide came back it should stand the strain.

The Vicar would have been shocked beyond words by the life of complete indulgence led by his small daughter. She breakfasted in bed every day, served by Avery, who was firm as to the amount of nourishment taken, but comfortably lax on all other points. When the meal was over, Avery generally went marketing while she dressed, and they then went to the shore. If there were no marketing to be done, Avery would go down to the beach alone and wait for her there. There was a sheltered corner that they both loved, where, protected by towering rocks, they spent many a happy hour. It was just out of reach of the sea, exposed to the sun and sheltered from the wind—an ideal spot; and here they brought letters, books or needlework, and were busy or idle according to their moods.

Jeanie was often idle. She used to lie in the soft sand and dream, with her eyes on the far horizon; but of what she dreamed she said no word even to Avery. But she was always happy. Her smile was always ready, the lines of her mouth were always set in perfect content. She seemed to have all she desired at all times. They did not often stray from the shore, for she was easily tired; but they used to roam along it and search the crevices of the scattered rocks which held all manner of treasures. They spent the

time in complete accord. It was too good to last, Avery told herself. The way had become too easy.

It was on a morning about a week after their arrival that she went down at an early hour to their favourite haunt. There had been rain in the night, and a brisk west wind was blowing; but she knew that in that sheltered spot they would be protected, and Jeanie was pledged to join her there as soon as she was ready. The tide was coming in, and the sun shone amidst scudding white clouds. It was a morning on which to be happy for no other reason than lightness of heart; and Avery, with her work-bag on her arm, sang softly to herself as she went.

As usual she met no one. It was a secluded part of the shore. The little town was out of sight on the other side of a rocky promontory, and the place was lonely to desolation.

But Avery did not feel the loneliness. She had had a letter only that morning from Crowther, the friend of those far-off Australian days, and he expressed a hope of being able to pay her a flying visit at Stanbury Cliffs before settling down to work in grim earnest for the accomplishment of his life's desire. She would have welcomed Edmund Crowther at any time. He was the sort of friend whose coming could never bring anything but delight.

She wondered as she walked alone which day he would choose. She was rather glad that he had not fixed a definite date. It was good to feel that any day might bring him.

Nearing her destination, she became aware of light feet running on the firm sand behind her. She glanced over her shoulder, but the sun shone full in her eyes, and she only managed to discern vaguely a man's figure drawing near. He could not be pursuing her, she decided, and resumed her walk and her thoughts of Crowther—the friend who had stood by her at a time when she had been practically friendless.

But the running feet came nearer and nearer. She suddenly realized that they meant to overtake her, and with the knowledge the old quick dread pierced her heart. She wheeled abruptly round and stood still.

He was there, not a dozen yards from her. He hailed her as she turned.

She clenched her hands with sudden determination and went to meet him.

"Piers!" she said, and in her voice reproach and severity were oddly mingled.

But Piers was unabashed. He ran swiftly up to her, and caught her hands into his with an impetuous rush of words. "Here you are at last! I've been waiting for you for hours. But I was in the water when you first appeared, and I hadn't any towels, or I should have caught you up before."

He was laughing as he spoke, but it seemed to Avery that there was something not quite normal about him. His black hair lay in a wet plaster on his forehead, and below it his eyes glittered oddly, as if he were putting some force upon himself.

"How in the world did you get here?" she said.

He laughed again between his teeth. "I tell you, I've been here for hours. I came last night. But I couldn't knock you up at two in the morning. So I had to wait. How are you and Jeanie getting on?"

Avery gently withdrew her hands, and turned to pursue her way towards her rocky resting-place. "Jeanie is better," she said, in a voice that did not encourage any further solicitude on either Jeanie's behalf or her own.

Piers marched beside her, a certain doggedness in his gait. The laughter had died out of his face. He looked pale and stern, and fully as determined as she.

"Why didn't you tell us to expect you?" Avery asked at last.

"Were you not expecting me?" he returned, and his voice had the sharpness of a challenge.

She looked at him steadily for a moment or two, meeting eyes that flung back her scrutiny with grim defiance.

"Of course I was not expecting you," she said.

"And yet you were not—altogether—surprised to see me," he rejoined, a faint jeering echo in his voice.

Avery walked on till she reached her sheltered corner. Then she laid her work-bag down in the accustomed place, and very resolutely turned and faced him.

"Tell me why you have come!" she said.

He gazed at her for a moment fiercely from under his black brows; then suddenly and disconcertingly he seized her by the wrists.

"I'll tell you," he said, speaking rapidly, with feverish utterance. "I've come because—before Heaven—I can't keep away. Avery, listen to me! Yes, you must listen.

I've come because I must, because you are all the world to me and I want you unutterably. I don't believe—I can't believe—that I am nothing to you. You can't with honesty tell me so. I love you with all my soul, with all there is of me, good and bad. Avery—Avery, say you love me too!"

Just for an instant the arrogance went out of his voice and it sank to pleading. But Avery stood mute before him, very pale, desperately calm. She made not the faintest attempt to free herself, but her hands were hard clenched. There was nothing passive in her attitude.

He was aware of strong resistance, but it only goaded him to further effort. He lifted the clenched hands and held them tight against his heart.

"You needn't try to cast me off," he said, "for I simply won't go. I know you care. You wouldn't have taken the trouble to write that letter if you didn't. And so listen! I've come now to marry you. We can go up to town to-day—Jeanie too, if you like. And to-morrow—to-morrow we will be married by special licence. I've thought it all out. You can't refuse. I have money of my own—plenty of money. And you belong to me already. It's no good trying to deny it any more. You are my mate—my mate; and I won't try to live without you any longer!"

Wildly the words rushed out, spending themselves as it were upon utter silence. Avery's hands were no longer clenched. They lay open against his breast, and the mad beating of his heart thrilled through and through her as she stood.

He bent towards her eagerly, passionately. His hands reached out to clasp her; yet he paused. "Avery! Avery!" he whispered very urgently.

Her eyes were raised to his, grey and steady and fearless. Not by the smallest gesture did she seek to escape him. She suffered the hands upon her shoulders. She suffered the fiery passion of his gaze.

Only at last very clearly, very resolutely, she spoke: "Piers—no!"

His face was close to hers, glowing and vital and tensely determined. "I say 'Yes,'" he said, with brief decision.

Avery was silent. His hands were drawing her, and still she did not resist; but in those moments of silent inactivity

she was stronger than he. Her personality was at grips with his, and if she gained no ground, at least she held her own.

"Avery!" he said suddenly and sharply. "What's the matter with you? Why don't you speak?"

"I am waiting," she said.

"Waiting!" he echoed. "Waiting for what?"

"Waiting for you to come to yourself, Piers," she made steadfast answer.

He laughed at that, a quick, insolent laugh. "Do you think I don't know what I'm doing, then?"

"I am quite sure," she answered, "that when you know, you will be more ashamed than any honourable man should ever have reason to be."

He winced at the words. She saw the hot blood surge in a great wave to his forehead, and she quailed inwardly, though outwardly she made no sign. His grip was growing every instant more compelling. She knew that he was bracing himself for one great effort that should batter down the strength that withstood him. His lips were so close to hers that she could feel his breath, quick and hot, upon her face. And still she made no struggle for freedom, knowing instinctively that the instant her self-control yielded the battle was lost.

Slowly the burning flush died away under her eyes. His face changed, grew subtly harder, less passionate. "So," he said, with an odd quietness, "I'm not to kiss you. It would be dishonourable—what?"

She made unflinching reply. "It would be despicable—and you know it—to kiss any woman against her will."

"Would it be against your will?" he asked.

"Yes, it would," firmly she answered him, yet a quiver of agitation went through her. She felt her resolution begin to waver.

But in that moment something in Piers seemed to give way also. He cried out to her as if in sudden, intolerable pain: "Avery! Avery! Are you made of stone? Can't you see that this is life or death to me?"

She answered him instantly; it was almost as if she had been waiting for that cry of his. "Yes, but you must get the better of it. You can if you will. It is unworthy of you. You are trying to take what is not yours. You have made a mistake, and you are wronging yourself and me."

"What?" he exclaimed. "You don't love me, then?"

He flung his arms wide upon the words, with a gesture of the most utter despair, and turned from her. A moment he stood swaying, as if bereft of all his strength; and then with abrupt effort he began to move away. He stumbled blindly, heavily, as he went, and the crying of the wheeling seagulls came plaintively through a silence that could be felt.

But ere that silence paralysed her, Avery spoke, raising her voice, for the urgency was great.

"Piers, stop!"

He stopped instantly, but he did not turn, merely stood tensely waiting.

She collected herself and went after him. She laid a hand that trembled on his arm.

"Don't leave me like this!" she said.

Slowly he turned his head and looked at her, and the misery of that look went straight to her heart. All the woman's compassion in her throbbed up to the surface. She found herself speaking with a tenderness which a moment before no power on earth would have drawn from her.

"Piers, something is wrong; something has happened. Won't you tell me what it is?"

"I can't," he said.

His lower lip quivered unexpectedly and she saw his teeth bite savagely upon it. "I'd better go," he said.

But her hand still held his arm. "No; wait!" she said. "You can't go like this. Piers, what is the matter with you? Tell me!"

He hesitated. She saw that his self-control was tottering. Abruptly at length he spoke: "I can't. I'm not master of myself. I—I——" He broke off short and became silent.

"I knew you weren't," she said, and then, acting upon an impulse which she knew instinctively that she would never regret, she gave him her other hand also. "Let us forget all this!" she said.

It was generously spoken, so generously that it could not fail to take effect. He looked at her in momentary surprise, began to speak, stopped, and with a choked, unintelligible utterance took her two hands with the utmost reverence into his own, and bowed his forehead upon them. The utter

abandonment of the action revealed to her in that moment how completely he had made her the dominating influence of his life.

"Shall we sit down and talk?" she said gently.

She could not be other than gentle with him. The appeal of his weakness was greater than any display of strength. She could not but respond to it.

He set her free and dropped down heavily upon a rock, leaning his head in his hands.

She waited a few moments beside him; then, as he remained silent, she bent towards him.

"Piers, what is it?"

With a sharp movement he straightened himself, and turned his face to the sea.

"I'm a fool," he said, speaking with an odd, unsteady vehemence. "Fact is, I've been out all night on this beastly shore. I've walked miles. And I suppose I'm tired."

He made the confession with a shamefaced laugh, still looking away to the horizon.

"All night!" Avery repeated in astonishment. "But, Piers!"

He nodded several times emphatically. "And those infernal sea-birds have been squawking along with those thrice-accursed crows ever since daybreak. I'd like to wring their ugly necks, every jack one of 'em!"

Avery laughed in spite of herself. "We all feel peevish sometimes," she said, as one of the offenders sailed overhead with a melancholy cry. "But haven't you had any breakfast? You must be starving."

"I am!" said Piers. "I feel like a wolf. But you needn't be afraid to sit down. I shan't gobble you up this time."

She heard the boyish appeal in his voice and almost unconsciously she yielded to it. She sat down on the rock beside him, but he instantly slipped from it and stretched himself in a dog-like attitude at her feet.

His chin was propped in his hands, his face turned to the white sand on which he lay. She looked down at his black head with more than compassion in her eyes. It was horribly difficult to snub this boy lover of hers.

She sat and waited silently for him to speak.

He dropped one hand at length and began to dig his brown

fingers into the powdery sand with irritable energy; but a minute or more passed before very grumpily he spoke:

"I've had a row with my grandfather. We both of us behaved like wild beasts. In the end, he thought he was going to give me a caning, and that was more than I could stand. I smashed his ruler for him and bolted. I should have struck him with it if I hadn't. And after that, I cleared out and came here. And I'm not going back."

So with blunt defiance he made the announcement, and as he did so, it came to Avery suddenly and quite convincingly that she had been the cause of the quarrel. A shock of dismay went through her. She had not anticipated this. She felt that the suspicion must be verified or refuted at once.

"Piers," she said quickly, "why did you quarrel with your grandfather? Was it because of your affair with Miss Rose?"

"I never had an affair with Miss Rose," said Piers rather sullenly. He dug up a small stone, and flung it with vindictive force at the face of the cliff. "Ask her, if you don't believe me!"

He paused a moment, then went on in a dogged note: "I told him—of a certain intention of mine. He tackled me about it first, was absolutely intolerable. I just couldn't hold myself in. And then somehow we got violent. It was his fault. Anyway, he began it."

"You haven't told me—yet—what you quarrelled about," said Avery, with a sinking heart.

He shrugged his shoulders without looking at her. "It doesn't matter, does it?"

She made answer with a certain firmness: "Yes, I think it does."

"Well, then"—abruptly he raised himself and faced round, his dark eyes raised to hers—"I told him, Avery, that if I couldn't marry the woman I loved, I would never marry at all."

There was no sullenness about him now, only steadfast purpose. He looked her full in the face as he said it, and she quivered a little before the mastery of his look.

He laid a hand upon her knee as she sat above him in sore perplexity. "Would you have me do anything else?" he said.

She answered him with a conscious effort: "I want you to love—and marry—the right woman."

He uttered a queer, unsteady laugh and leaned his head against her. "Oh, my dear," he said, "there is no other woman but you in all the world."

Something fiery that was almost like a dart of pain went through Avery at his words. She moved instinctively, but it was not in shrinking. After a moment she laid her hand upon his.

"Piers," she said, "I can't bear hurting you."

"You wouldn't hurt a fly," said Piers.

She smiled faintly. "Not if I could help it. But that doesn't prove that I am fond of flies. And now, Piers, I am going to ask a very big thing of you. I wonder if you will do it."

"I wonder," said Piers.

He had not moved at her touch, yet she felt his fingers close tensely as they lay upon her knee, and she guessed that he was still striving to control the inner tumult that had so nearly overwhelmed him a few minutes before.

"I know it is a big thing," she said. "Yet—for my sake, if you like—I want you to do it."

"I will do anything for your sake," he made passionate answer.

"Thank you," she said gently. "Then, Piers, I want you —please—to go back to Sir Beverley at once, and make it up."

He withdrew his hand sharply from hers, and sat up, turning his back upon her. "No!" he said harshly. "No!"

"Please, Piers!" she said very earnestly.

He locked his arms round his knees and sat in silence, staring moodily out to sea.

"Please, Piers!" she said again, and lightly touched his shoulder with her fingers.

He hunched the shoulder away from her with a gesture of boyish impatience, and then abruptly, as if realizing what he had done, he turned back to her, caught the hand, and pressed it to his lips.

"I'm a brute, dear. Forgive me! Of course—if you wish it—I'll go back. But as to making it up, well"—he gulped once or twice—"it doesn't rest only with me, you know."

"Oh, Piers," she said, "you are all he has. He couldn't be hard to you!"

Piers smiled a wry smile, and said nothing.

"Besides," she went on gently, "there is really nothing for you to quarrel about—that is, if I am the cause of the trouble. It is perfectly natural that your grandfather should wish you to make a suitable marriage, perfectly natural that he should not want you to run after the wrong woman. You can tell him, Piers, that I absolutely see his point of view, but that so far as I am concerned, he need not be anxious. It is not my intention to marry again."

"All right," said Piers.

He gave her hand a little shake and released it. For a second—only a second—she caught a sparkle in his eyes that seemed to her almost like a gleam of mockery. And then with characteristic suddenness he sprang to his feet.

"Well, I'd better be going," he said, in a voice that was perfectly normal and free from agitation, "I can't stop to see the kiddie this time. I'm glad she's going on all right. I wonder when you'll be back again."

"Not at present, I think," said Avery, trying not to be disconcerted by his abruptness.

He looked down at her whimsically. "You're a good sort, Avery," he said. "I won't be so violent next time."

"There mustn't be a next time," she said quickly. "Please, Piers, that must be quite understood!"

"All right," he said again. "I understand."

And with that very suddenly he left her, so suddenly that she sat motionless on her rock and stared after him, not believing that he was really taking his leave.

He did not turn his head, however, and very soon he passed round the jutting headland, and was gone from her sight. Only when that happened did she draw a long, long breath, and realize how much of her strength had been spent to gain what after all appeared to be but a very barren victory.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE RETURN

"AH! *C'est Monsieur Pierre enfin!*" Eagerly Victor greeted the appearance of his young master. He looked as if he would have liked to embrace him.

Piers' attitude, however, did not encourage any display of tenderness. He flung himself gloomily down into a chair and regarded the man with sombre eyes.

"Where's Sir Beverley?" he said.

Victor spread forth expressive hands. "*Mais*, Sir Beverley, he sit up all the night attending you, *mon petit monsieur. Et moi*, I sit up also. *Mais, Monsieur Pierre! Monsieur Pierre!*"

He began to shake his head at Piers in fond reproof, but Piers paid no attention.

"Sat up all night—what?" he said. "Then where is he now? In bed?"

There was a deep line between his black brows; all the gaiety and sparkle had gone from his eyes. He looked tired out.

It was close upon the luncheon-hour, and he had tramped up from the station. There were refreshments in front of him, but he bluntly refused to touch them.

"Why can't you speak, man?" he said irritably. "Tell me where he is!"

"He has gone for his ride as usual," Victor said, speaking through pursed lips. "But he is very, very feeble to-day, *Monsieur Pierre*. We beg him not to go. But what would you? He is the master. We could not stop him. But he sit in his saddle—like this."

Victor's gesture descriptive of the bent, stricken figure that had ridden forth that morning was painfully true to life.

Piers sprang to his feet. "And he isn't back yet? Where on earth can he be? Which way did he go?"

Victor raised his shoulders. "He go down the drive—as always. *Après cela, je ne sais pas.*"

"Confusion!" ejaculated Piers, and was gone.

He had returned by a short cut across the park, but now he tore down the long avenue, running like a trained athlete, head up and elbows in, possessed by the single purpose of reaching the lodge in as brief a time as possible. They would know at the lodge which way his grandfather had gone.

He found Marshall just turning in at his gate for the mid-day meal, and hailed him without ceremony.

The old man stopped and surveyed him with sour disapproval. The news of Piers' abrupt disappearance on the previous night had spread.

No, Marshall could give him no news as to the master's whereabouts; he had been out all the morning.

"Well, find Mrs. Marshall!" ordered Piers impatiently. "She'll know something. She must have opened the gate."

Mrs. Marshall, summoned by a surly yell from her husband, stood in the doorway, thin-lipped and austere, and announced briefly that Sir Beverley had gone down towards the Vicarage; she didn't know no more than that.

It was enough for Piers. He was gone again like a bird on the wing. The couple at the lodge looked after him with a species of unwilling admiration. His very arrogance fed their pride in him, disapprove though they might of his wild, foreign ways. Whatever the mixture in his veins, the old master's blood ran there, and they would always be loyal to that.

That run to the Vicarage taxed even Piers' powers. The steep hill at the end made him aware that his strength had its limits, and he was forced to pause for breath when he reached the top. He leaned against the Vicarage gate-post with the memory of that winter evening in his mind when Avery had come swift-footed to the rescue, and had cooled his fury with a bucket of cold water.

A step in the garden made him straighten himself abruptly. He turned to see a tall, black-coated figure emerge. The Reverend Stephen Lorimer came up with dignity and greeted him.

"Were you about to enter my humble abode?" he enquired.

"Is my grandfather here?" asked Piers.

Mr. Lorimer smiled benignly. He liked to imagine himself upon terms of intimacy with Sir Beverley, though the latter did very little to justify the idea.

"Well, no," he said, "I have not had the pleasure of seeing him here to-day. Did he express the intention of paying me a visit?"

"No, sir, no!" said Piers impatiently. "I only thought it possible, that's all. Good-bye!"

He swung round and departed, leaving the worthy Vicar looking after him with a shrewd and not over-friendly smile at the corners of his eyes.

Beyond the Vicarage the road wound round again to the park, and Piers followed it. It led to a gate that opened upon a riding which was a favourite stretch for a gallop with

both Sir Beverley and himself. Through this he passed, no longer running, but striding over the springy turf between the budding beech saplings at a pace that soon took him into the heart of the woodland

Pressing on, he came a length to a cross-riding, and here on boggy ground he discovered recent hoof-marks. There were a good many of them, and he was puzzled for a time as to the direction they had taken. The animal seemed to have wandered to and fro. But he found a continuous track at length and followed it.

It led to an old summer-house perched on a slope that overlooked the scene of Jeanie's accident in the winter. A cold wind drove down upon him as he ascended. The sky was grey with scurrying clouds. The bare downs looked indescribably desolate.

Piers hastened along with set teeth. The dread he would not acknowledge hung like a numbing weight upon him. Somehow, inexplicably, he knew that he was nearing the end of his quest.

The long moan of the wind was the only sound to be heard. It seemed to fill the world. No voice of bird or beast came from near or far. He seemed to travel through a vast emptiness—the only living thing astir.

He reached the thatched summer-house at last, noted with a curious detachment that it was beginning to look dilapidated, wondered if he would find it after all deserted, and the next moment was nearly overwhelmed by a huge grey body that hurled itself upon him from the interior of the little arbour.

It was Cæsar, the great Dalmatian, who greeted him thus effusively, and Piers realized in an instant that the dog had some news to impart. He pushed him aside with a brief word of welcome and entered the ivy-grown place.

"Hullo!" gasped a voice with painful utterance. "Hullo!"

And in a moment he discerned Sir Beverley crouched in a corner, grey-faced, his riding-whip still clutched in his hand.

Impetuously he went to him, stooped above him. "What on earth has happened, sir? You haven't been thrown?" he queried anxiously.

"Thrown! I!" Sir Beverley's voice cracked derisively. "No! I got off—to have a look at the place—and the brute jibbed—and gave me the slip."

The words came with difficult jerks, his breathing was short and laboured. Piers, bending over him, saw a spasm of pain contract the grey face that, nevertheless, looked so indomitably into his.

"He'll go back to stables," growled Sir Beverley. "It's a way colts have—when they've had their fling. What have you come back for, eh? Thought I couldn't do without you?"

There was a stony glint in his eyes as he asked the question. His thin lips curved sardonically.

Piers, still with anxiety lying cold at his heart, had no place left for resentment. He made swift and winning answer: "I've been a brute, sir. I've come back to ask your forgiveness."

The sardonic lips parted. "Instead of—a hiding—eh?" gasped Sir Beverley.

Piers drew back momentarily; but the grey, drawn face compelled his pity. He stifled his wrath unborn. "I'll take that first, sir," he said steadily.

Sir Beverley's frown deepened, but his breathing was growing less oppressed. He suddenly collected his energies and spoke with his usual irascibility.

"Oh, don't try any of your damned heroics on me, sir! Apologise like a gentleman—if you can! If not—if not——" He broke off panting, his lips still forming words that he lacked the strength to utter.

Piers sat down beside him on the crazy bench. "I will do anything you wish, sir," he said. "I'm horribly sorry for the way I've treated you. I'm ready to make any amends in my power."

"Oh, get away!" growled out Sir Beverley. But with the words his hand came gropingly forth and fastened in a hard grip on Piers' arm. "You talk like a Sunday-school book," he said. "What the devil did you do it for, eh?"

It was roughly spoken, but Piers was quick to recognize the spirit behind the words. He clapped his own hand upon his grandfather's, and was shocked afresh at its icy coldness.

"I say, do let's go!" he said. "We can't talk here. It's downright madness to sit in this draughty hole. Come along, sir!" He thrust a vigorous arm about the old man and hoisted him to his feet.

"Oh, you're mighty strong!" gasped Sir Beverley. "Strong enough—to kick over—the traces, eh?"

"Never again, sir," said Piers with decision.

Whereat Sir Beverley looked at him searchingly, and gibed no more.

They went out together on to the open, wind-swept hillside, Piers still strongly supporting him, for he stumbled painfully. It was a difficult progress for them both, and haste was altogether out of the question.

Sir Beverley revived somewhat as they went, but more than once he had to pause to get his breath. His weakness was a revelation to Piers, though he sought to reassure himself with the reflection that it was the natural outcome of his night's vigil; and moment by moment his compunction grew.

They were no more than a mile from the Abbey, but it took them the greater part of two hours to accomplish the distance, and at the end of it Sir Beverley was hanging upon Piers in a state that bordered upon collapse.

His animal had just returned riderless, and considerable consternation prevailed. Victor, who was on the watch, rushed to meet them with characteristic nimbleness, and he and Piers between them carried Sir Beverley in, and laid him down before the great hall fire.

But though so exhausted as to be scarcely conscious, he still clung fast to Piers, not suffering him to stir from his side; and there Piers remained, chafing the cold hands and administering brandy, while Victor, invaluable in an emergency, procured pillows, blankets, hot-water bottles, everything that his fertile brain could suggest to restore the failing strength.

Again, though slowly, Sir Beverley rallied, recovered his faculties, came back to full understanding. "Had anything to eat?" he rapped out so suddenly that Piers, kneeling beside him, jumped with astonishment.

"I, sir? No, I'm not hungry," he said. "You're feeling better,—what? Can I get you something?"

"Oh, don't be a damn' fool!" said Sir Beverley. "Tell 'em to fetch some lunch!"

It was the turning-point. From that moment he began to recover in a fashion that amazed Piers, cast aside blankets and pillows, sternly forbade Piers to summon the doctor,

and sat up before the fire with a grim refusal to be coddled any longer.

They lunched together in the warmth of the blazing logs, and Sir Beverley became so normal in his attitude that Piers began at last to feel reassured.

He did not broach the matter that lay between them, knowing well that his grandfather's temperament was not such as to leave it long in abeyance; and they smoked together in peace after the meal as though the strife of the previous evening had never been.

But the memory of it overhung them both, and finally at the end of a lengthy silence Sir Beverley turned his stone-grey eyes upon his grandson and spoke!

"Well? What have you to say for yourself?"

Piers came out of a reverie and looked up with a faint, rueful smile. "Nothing, sir," he said.

"Nothing? What do you mean by that?" Sir Beverley's voice was sharp. "You go away like a raving lunatic, and stay away all night, and then come back with nothing to say. What have you been up to? Tell me that!"

Piers leaned slowly forward, took up the poker and gently pushed it into the fire. "She won't have me," he said, with his eyes upon the leaping flames.

"What?" exclaimed Sir Beverley. "You've been after that hussy again?"

Piers' brows drew together in a thick, ominous line; but he merely nodded and said: "Yes."

"The devil you have!" ejaculated Sir Beverley. "And she refused you?"

"She did." Again very softly Piers poked at the blazing logs, his eyes fixed and intent. "It served me right—in a way," he said, speaking meditatively, almost as if to himself. "I was a hound—to ask her. But—somehow—I was driven. However"—he drove the poker in a little further—"it's all the same now, as she's refused me. That's why"—he turned his eyes suddenly upon Sir Beverley—"there's nothing to be said."

There was no defiance in his look, but it held something of a baffling quality. It was almost as if in some fashion he were conscious of relief.

Sir Beverley stared at him, angry and incredulous. "Re-

fused you! What the devil for? Wanted my consent, I suppose? Thought I held the purse-strings, eh?"

"Oh no," said Piers, again faintly smiling, "she didn't care a damn about that. She knows I am not dependent upon you. But—she has no use for me, that's all."

"No use for you!" Sir Beverley's voice rose. "What the—what the devil does she want, then, I should like to know?"

"She doesn't want anyone," said Piers. "At least she thinks she doesn't. You see, she's been married before."

There was a species of irony in his voice that yet was without bitterness. He turned back to his aimless stirring of the fire, and there fell a silence between them.

But Sir Beverley's eyes were fixed upon his grandson's face in a close, unsparing scrutiny. "So you thought you might as well come back," he said at last.

"She made me," said Piers, without looking round.

"Made you!"

Again Piers nodded. "I was to tell you from her that she quite understands your attitude; but that you needn't be anxious, as she has no intention of marrying again."

"Confound her impudence!" ejaculated Sir Beverley.

"Oh no!" Piers' voice sounded too tired to be indignant. "I don't think you can accuse her of that. There has never been any flirtation between us. It wasn't her fault I—made a fool of myself. It just happened in the ordinary course of things."

He ceased to speak, laid down the poker without sound, and sat with clasped hands, staring blindly before him.

Again there fell a silence. The clock in the corner ticked on with melancholy regularity, the logs hissed and spluttered viciously; but the two men sat in utter stillness, both bowed as if beneath a pressing burden.

One of them moved at last, stretched out a bony, trembling hand, laid it on the other's shoulder.

"Piers, boy," Sir Beverley said, with slow articulation, "believe me, there's not a woman on this earth worth grizzling about. They're liars and impostors, every one."

Piers started a little, then with a very boyish movement, he laid his cheek against the old bent fingers. "My dear sir," he said, "but you're a woman-hater!"

"I know," said Sir Beverley, still in that heavy, fateful

fashion. "And I have reason. I tell you, boy—and I know—you would be better off in your coffin than linked to a woman you seriously cared for. It's hell on earth—hell on earth!"

"Or paradise," muttered Piers.

"A fool's paradise, boy; a paradise that turns to dust and ashes." Sir Beverley's voice quivered suddenly. He withdrew his hand to fumble in an inner pocket. In a moment he stretched it forth again with a key lying on the palm.

"Take that!" he said. "Open that bureau thing behind you! Look in the left-hand drawer! There's something there for you to see."

Piers obeyed him. There was that in Sir Beverley's manner that silenced all questioning. He pulled out the drawer and looked in. It contained one thing only—a revolver.

Sir Beverley went on speaking, calmly, dispassionately, wholly impersonally. "It's loaded—has been loaded for fifty years. But I never used it. And that not because my own particular hell wasn't hot enough, but just because I wouldn't have it said that I'd ever loved any she-devil enough to let her be my ruin. There were times enough when I nearly did it. I've sat all night with the thing in my hand. But I hung on for that reason, till at last the fire burned out, and I didn't care. Every woman is the same to me now. I know now—and you've got to know it too—that woman is only fit to be the servant, not the mistress, of man—and a damn' treacherous servant at that. She was made for man's use, and if he is fool enough to let her get the upper hand, then Heaven help him, for he certainly won't be in a position to help himself!"

He stopped abruptly, and in the silence Piers shut and relocked the drawer. He dropped the key into his own pocket, and came back to the fire.

Sir Beverley looked up at him with something of an effort. "Boy," he said, "you've got to marry some day, I know. You've got to have children. But—you're young, you know. There's plenty of time before you. You might wait a bit—just a bit—till I'm out of the way. I won't keep you long; and I won't beat you often, either—if you'll condescend to stay with me."

He smiled with the words, his own grim, ironical smile;

but the pathos of it cut straight to Piers' heart. He went down on his knees beside the old man and thrust his arm about the shrunken shoulders.

"I'll never leave you again, sir," he vowed earnestly. "I've been a heartless brute, and I'm most infernally sorry. As to marrying, well—there's no more question of that for me. I couldn't marry Ina Rose. You understand that?"

"Never liked the chit," growled Sir Beverley. "Only thought she'd answer your purpose better than some. For you've got to get an heir, boy; remember that! You're the only Evesham left."

"Oh, damn!" said Piers very wearily. "What does it matter?"

Sir Beverley looked at him from under his thick brows piercingly but without condemnation. "It's up to you, Piers," he said.

"Is it?" said Piers, with a groan. "Well, let's leave it at that for the present! Sure you've forgiven me?"

Sir Beverley's grim face relaxed again. He put his arm round Piers and held him hard for a moment.

Then: "Oh, drat it, Piers!" he said testily. "Get away do! And behave yourself for the future!"

Whereat Piers laughed, a short, unsteady laugh, and went back to his chair.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE DECISION

"THE matter is settled," said the Reverend Stephen Lorimer, in the tones of icy decision with which his wife was but too tragically familiar. "I engaged Mrs. Denys to be a help to you, not exclusively to Jeanie. The child is quite well enough to return home, and I do not feel myself justified in incurring any further expense now that her health is quite sufficiently restored."

"But the children were all counting on going to Stanbury Cliffs for the Easter holidays," protested Mrs. Lorimer, almost tearfully. "We cannot disappoint them, Stephen!"

Mr. Lorimer's lips closed very firmly for a few seconds. Then: "The change home will be quite sufficient for them," he said. "I have given the matter my full consideration,

my dear Adelaide, and no argument of yours will now move me. Mrs. Denys and Jeanie have been away for a month and they must now return. It is your turn for a change, and as soon as Eastertide is over I intend to take you away with me for ten days or so and leave Mrs. Denys in charge of —the bear-garden, as I fear it but too truly resembles. You are quite unfit for the noise and racket of the holidays. And I myself have been feeling lately the need of a little—shall I call it re-creation?" Mr. Lorimer smiled self-indulgently over the term. He liked to play with words. "I presume you have no vital objection to accompanying me?"

"Oh, of course not. I should like it above all things," Mrs. Lorimer hastened to assure him, "if it were not for Jeanie. I don't like the thought of bringing her home just when her visit is beginning to do her so much good."

"She cannot remain away for ever," said Mr. Lorimer. "Moreover, her delicacy must have been considerably exaggerated, or such a sudden improvement could scarcely have taken place. At all events, so it appears to me. She must therefore return home and spend the holidays in wholesome amusements with the other children; and when they are over, I really must turn my serious attention to her education, which has been so sadly neglected since Christmas. Mrs. Denys is doubtless a very excellent woman in her way, but she is not, I fear, one to whom I could safely entrust the intellectual development of a child of Jeanie's age." He paused, looking up with complacent inquiry at his wife's troubled face. "And now what scruples are stirring in the mind of my spouse?" he asked, with playful affection.

Mrs. Lorimer did not smile in answer. Her worried little face only drew into more anxious lines. "Stephen," she said, "I do wish you would consult Doctor Tudor before you quite decide to have Jeanie home at present."

The Vicar's mouth turned down, and he looked for a moment so extremely unpleasant that Mrs. Lorimer quailed. Then: "My dear," he said deliberately, "when I decide upon a specific course of action, I carry it through invariably. If I were not convinced that what I am about to do were right, I should not do it. Pray let me hear no more upon the subject! And remember, Adelaide, it is my express command that you do not approach Doctor Tudor in this matter. He is a most interfering person, and would welcome any

excuse to obtain a footing in this house again. But now that I have at length succeeded in shaking him off, I intend to keep him at a distance for the future. And he is not to be called in—understand this very clearly, if you please—except in a case of extreme urgency. This is a distinct order, Adelaide, and I shall be severely displeased if you fail to observe it. And now," he resumed his lighter manner again as he rose from his chair, "I must hie me to the parish room where my good Miss Whalley is awaiting me."

He stretched forth a firm, kind hand and patted his wife's shoulder.

"We must see what we can do to bring a little colour into those pale cheeks," he said. "A fortnight in the Cornish Riviera perhaps. Or we might take a peep at Shakespeare's country. But we shall see, we shall see! I will write to Mrs. Denys and acquaint her with my decision this evening."

He was gone, leaving Mrs. Lorimer to pace up and down his study in futile distress of mind. Only that morning a letter from Avery had reached her, telling her of Jeanie's continued progress, and urging her to come and take her place for a little while. It was such a change as her tired soul craved, but she had not dared to tell her husband so. And now, it seemed, Jeanie's good time also was to be terminated.

There was no doubt about it. Rodding did not suit the child. She was never well at home. The Vicarage was shut in by trees, a damp, unhealthy place. And Dr. Tudor had told her in plain terms that Jeanie lacked the strength to make any headway there. She was like a wilting plant in that atmosphere. She could not thrive in it. Dry warmth was what she needed, and it had made all the difference to her. Avery's letter had been full of hope. She referred to Dr. Tudor's simile of the building of a sea-wall. "We are strengthening it every day," she wrote. "In a few more weeks it ought to be proof against any ordinary tide."

A few more weeks! Mrs. Lorimer wrung her hands. Stephen did not know, did not realize; and she was powerless to convince him. Avery would not convince him either. He only tolerated Avery because she was so useful.

She knew exactly the sort of letter he would write, desiring their return; and Avery, for all her quiet strength, would have to submit. Oh, it was cruel—cruel!

The tears were coursing down her cheeks when the door opened unexpectedly and Olive entered. She paused at sight of her mother, looking at her with just the Vicar's air of chill inquiry.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked.

Mrs. Lorimer turned hastily to the window and began to dry her eyes.

Olive went to a bookshelf and stood before it. After a moment she took out a book and deliberately turned the leaves. Her attitude was plainly repressive.

Finally she returned the book to the shelf and turned. "Why are you crying, Mother?"

Mrs. Lorimer leaned her head against the window-frame with a heavy sigh. "I am very miserable, Olive," she said, a catch in her voice.

"No one need be that," observed Olive. "Father says that misery is a sign of mental weakness."

Mrs. Lorimer was silent.

"Don't you think you had better leave off crying and find something to do?" suggested her daughter in her cool, young voice.

Still Mrs. Lorimer neither moved nor spoke.

Olive came a step nearer. There was obvious distaste on her face. "I wish you would try to be a little brighter—for Father's sake," she said. "I don't think you treat him very kindly."

It was evident that she spoke from a sense of duty. Mrs. Lorimer straightened herself with another weary sigh.

"Run along, my dear!" she said. "I am sure you are busy."

Olive turned, half vexed and half relieved, and walked to the door. Her mother watched her wistfully. It was in her mind to call her back, fold her in her arms and appeal for sympathy. But the severity of the child's pose was too suggestive of the Vicar's unbending attitude towards feminine weakness, and she restrained the impulse, knowing that she would appeal in vain. There was infinitely more comfort to be found in the society of Baby Phil, and, smiling wanly at the thought, she went up to the nursery in search of it.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE LAST DEBT

THERE was no combating the Vicar's decision. Avery realized that fact from the outset even before Mrs. Lorimer's agitated note upon the subject reached her. The fiat had gone forth, and submission was the only course.

Jeanie received the news without a murmur. "I don't mind really," she said. "It's very nice here, but then it's nice at home, too, when you are there. And then there is Piers, too."

Yes, there was Piers—another consideration that filled Avery with uneasiness. No word from Piers had reached her since that early morning on the shore, but his silence did not reassure her. She had half expected a boyish letter of apology, some friendly reassurance, some word at least of his return to Rodding Abbey. But she had heard nothing. She did not so much as know if he had returned or not.

Neither had she heard from her friend Edmund Crowther. With a sense of keen disappointment she wrote to his home in the North, to tell him of the change in her plans. She could not ask him to the Vicarage, and it seemed that she might not meet him after all.

She also sent a hurried note to Lennox Tudor, but they had only three days in which to terminate their visit, and she received no reply. Later, she heard that Tudor had been away for those days, and did not open the note until the actual day of their return.

The other children were expected home from school during the week before Easter, and Mr. Lorimer desired that Avery should be at the Vicarage to prepare for them. So, early in the week they returned.

It seemed that spring had come at last. The hedges were all bursting into tenderest green, and all the world looked young.

"The primroses will be out in the Park woods," said Jeanie. "We will go and gather heaps and heaps."

"Are you allowed to go wherever you like there?" asked Avery, thinking of the game.

"Oh, no," said Jeanie thoughtfully. "But we always do. Mr. Marshall chases us sometimes, but we always get away."

She smiled at the thought, and Avery frankly rejoiced to see her enthusiasm for the wicked game of trespassing in the Squire's preserves. She did not know that the amusement had been strictly prohibited by the Vicar, and it did not occur to Jeanie to tell her. None of the children had ever paid any attention to the prohibition. There were some rules that no one could keep.

The return of the rest of the family kept the days that succeeded their return extremely lively. Jeanie was in higher spirits than Avery had ever seen her. She seemed more childish, more eager for fun, as though some of the zest of life had got into her veins at last. Her mother ascribed the change to Avery's influence, and was pathetic in her gratitude, though Avery disclaimed all credit, declaring that the sea-air had wrought the wonder.

When Lennox Tudor saw her, he looked at Avery with an odd smile behind his glasses. "You've built the wall," he said.

They had met by the churchyard gate, and Jeanie and Pat were having a hopping race down the hill. Avery looked after them with a touch of wistfulness. "But I wish she could have been away longer."

Tudor frowned. "Yes. Why on earth not? The Reverend Stephen again, I suppose. I wish I had had your letter sooner, though, as a matter of fact, I'm not in favour just now, and my interference would probably weigh in the wrong balance. Keep the child out as much as possible! It's the only way. She has made good progress. There is no reason at present why she should go back again."

No, there was no reason; yet Avery's heart misgave her. She wished she might have had longer for the building of that wall.

Good Friday was more or less a day of penance in the Vicar's family. It began with lengthy prayers in the dining-room, so lengthy that Avery feared that Mrs. Lorimer would faint ere they came to an end. Then after a rigorously silent breakfast the children were assembled in the study to be questioned upon the Church Catechism—a species of discipline peculiarly abhorrent to them all by reason of the Vicar's sarcastic comments upon their ignorance.

At the end of this dreary exercise they were dismissed to prepare for church, where there followed a service which Avery regarded as downright revolting. It consisted mainly of prayers—as many prayers as the Vicar could get in, rendered in an emotionless monotone, with small regard for sense and none whatever for feeling. The whole thing was drab and unattractive to the utmost limit, and Avery rose at length from her knees with a feeling of having been deliberately cheated of a thing she valued. She left the church in an unwonted spirit of exasperation, which lasted throughout the midday meal, which was as oppressively silent as breakfast had been.

The open relief with which the children trooped away to the schoolroom found a warm echo in her heart. She even almost smiled in sympathy when Julian breathed a deep thanksgiving that that show was over for one more year.

Neither Piers nor his grandfather had been in the church, and their absence did not surprise her. She did not feel that she herself could ever face such a service again. The memory of Piers at the organ came to her as she dressed to accompany the children upon their primrosing expedition, and a sudden passionate longing followed it to hear that music again. She was feeling starved in her soul that day.

But when they reached the green solitudes of the park woodlands the bitterness began to pass away. It was all so beautiful; the mossy riding up which they turned was so springy underfoot, and the singing of a thousand birds made endless music whichever way they wandered.

"It's better than church, isn't it?" said Jeanie softly, pressing close to her. And Avery smiled in answer. It was balm to the spirit.

The squire's preserves were enclosed in wire netting, and over this they climbed into their primrose paradise. Several partridges rose from the children's feet, and whirred noisily away, to the huge delight of the boys but to Avery's considerable dismay. However, Marshall was evidently not within earshot, and they settled down to the serious business of filling their baskets for the church decorations without interference.

The primroses grew thickly in a wonderful carpet that spread in all directions, sloping down to a glade where gurgled a brown stream. Down this glade Avery directed her party,

keeping a somewhat anxious eye upon Gracie and the three boys, who were in the wildest spirits after the severe strain of the morning. She and Jeanie picked rapidly and methodically. Olive had decided not to accompany the expedition. She did not care for primrosing, she told Avery, and her father had promised to read the Testament in Greek with her later in the afternoon, an intellectual exercise which she plainly regarded as extremely meritorious.

Her absence troubled no one; in fact, Julian, having overheard her excuse, remarked rudely that if she was going to put on side, they were better off without her; and Avery secretly agreed with him.

So in cheery accord they went their careless way through the preserves, scaring the birds and filling their baskets with great industry. They had reached the end of the glade and were contemplating fording the brook, when like a bolt from the blue discovery came upon them. A sound, like the blare of an angry bull, assailed them—a furious, inarticulate sound that speedily resolved into words.

"What the devil are you mischievous brats doing there?"

The whole party jumped violently at the suddenness of the attack. Avery's heart gave a most unpleasant jerk. She knew that voice.

Swiftly she turned in the direction whence it came, and saw again the huge white horse of the trampling hoofs that had once before been urged against her.

He was stamping and fretting on the other side of the stream, the banks of which were so steep as almost to form a chasm, and from his back the terrible old Squire hurled the vials of his wrath.

Ronald drew near to Avery, while Jeanie slipped a nervous hand into hers. Julian, however, turned a defiant face. "It's all right. He can't get at us," he said audibly.

At which remark Gracie laughed a little hysterically, and Pat made a grimace.

Perhaps it was this last that chiefly infuriated the Squire, for he literally bellowed with rage, snatched his animal back with a merciless hand, and then with whip and spur set him full at the stream.

It was a dangerous leap, for the ground on both banks was yielding and slippery. Avery stood transfixed to watch the result.

The horse made a great effort to obey his master's behests. It almost seemed as if he were furious too, Avery thought as he pounded forward to clear the obstacle. His leap was superb, clearing the stream by a good six feet, but as he landed among the primroses disaster overtook him. It must have been a rabbit-hole, Avery reflected later; for he blundered as he touched the ground, plunged forward, and fell headlong.

There followed a few moments of sickening confusion during which the horrified spectators had time to realize that Sir Beverley was pinned under the kicking animal; then, with a savage effort the great brute rolled over and struggled to his feet.

With a promptitude that spoke well for his nerve, Julian sprang forward and caught the dangling bridle. The creature tried to jib back upon his prostrate master, but he dragged him forward and held him fast.

Old Sir Beverley lay prone on the ground, in an awful stillness, with his white face turned to the sky. His eyes were fast shut, his arms flung wide, one hand still grasping the whip which he had wielded so fiercely a few seconds before.

"Is he dead?" whispered Jeanie, clinging close to Avery.

Avery gently released herself and moved forward. "No, dear, no! He—he is only stunned."

She knelt beside Sir Beverley, overcoming a horrible sensation of sickness as she did so. The whole catastrophe had been of so sudden and so violent a nature that she felt almost stunned herself.

She slipped an arm under the old man's head, and it hung upon her like a leaden weight.

"Oh, Avery, how dreadful!" exclaimed Gracie, aghast.

"Take my handkerchief!" said Avery quickly. "Run down and soak it in the stream! Mind how you go! It's very steep."

Gracie went like the wind.

Avery began, with fingers that shook in spite of her utmost resolution, to try to loosen Sir Beverley's collar.

"Let me!" said Ronald gently.

She glanced up gratefully and relinquished the task to him. Ronald was neat in all his ways.

The return of Gracie with the wet handkerchief gave her something to do, and she tenderly moistened the stark, white

face. But the children's fears were crowding thick in her own heart. That awful inertness looked so terribly like death.

And then suddenly the grim lips parted and a quivering sigh passed through them.

The next moment abruptly the grey eyes opened and gazed full at Avery with a wide, glassy stare.

"What the—what the——" stammered Sir Beverley, and broke off with a hard gasp.

Avery sought to raise him higher, but his weight was too much for her, even with Ronald assisting.

"Find my—flask!" jerked out Sir Beverley, with panting breath.

Ronald began to search in his pockets and finally drew it forth. He opened it and gave it to Avery, who held it to the twitching lips.

Sir Beverley drank and closed his eyes. "I shall be—better soon," he said, in a choked whisper.

Avery waited, supporting him as strongly as she could, listening to the short, laboured breathing with deep foreboding.

"Couldn't I run down to the Abbey for help?" suggested Julian, who had succeeded at length in tying the chafing animal to a tree.

Avery considered. "I don't know. How far is it?"

"Not more than a mile. P'raps I should find Piers there. I'm sure I'd better go," the boy urged, with his eyes on the deathly face.

And after a moment Avery agreed with him. "Yes, I think perhaps you'd better. Gracie and Pat might go for Doctor Tudor meanwhile. I do hope you will find Piers. Tell him to bring two men, and something that they can carry him on. Jeanie, dear, you run home to your mother, and tell her how it is that we shall be late for tea. You won't startle her, I know."

They fell in with her desires at once. There was not one of them who would not have done anything for her. And so they scattered, departing upon their several missions, leaving Ronald only to share her vigil by the old Squire's side.

For a long time after their departure there was no change in Sir Beverley's state. He lay propped against Avery's arm and Ronald's knee, breathing quickly, with painful effort, through his parted lips. He kept his eyes closed, but they

knew that he was conscious by the heavy frown that drew his forehead. Once Avery offered him more brandy, but he refused it impatiently, and she desisted.

The deathly pallor had, however, begun to give place to a more natural hue, and as the minutes passed his breathing gradually grew less distressed. Once more his eyes opened, and he stared into Avery's face.

"Help me—to sit up!" he commanded.

They did their best, he struggling with piteously feeble efforts to help himself. Finally he managed to drag himself to a leaning position on one elbow, though for several seconds thereafter his gasping was terrible to hear.

Avery saw his lips move several times before any sound came from them. At length: "Send—that boy—away!" he gasped out.

Avery and Ronald looked at each other, and the boy got to his feet with an undecided air.

"Do you hear? Go!" rapped out Sir Beverley.

"Shall I, Avery?" whispered Ronald.

She nodded. "Yes, just a little way! I'll call you if I want you."

And half reluctantly Ronald obeyed.

"Has he gone?" asked Sir Beverley.

"Yes." Avery remained on her knees beside him. He looked as if he might collapse at any moment.

For a while he lay struggling for breath with his face towards the ground; then very suddenly his strength seemed to return. He raised his head and regarded her piercingly.

"You," he said curtly, "are the young woman who refused to marry my grandson."

The words were so totally unexpected that Avery literally gasped with astonishment. To be taken to task on this subject was an ordeal for which she was wholly unprepared.

"Well?" he said irritably. "That is so, I believe? You did refuse to marry him?"

"Yes," Avery admitted, feeling the hot colour flood her face under the merciless scrutiny of the stone-grey eyes. "But—but——"

"Well?" he said again, still more irritably. "But what?"

"Oh, need we discuss it?" she said appealingly. "I would so much rather not."

"I desire to discuss it," said Sir Beverley autocratically. "I desire to know—what objection you have to my grandson. Many women, let me tell you, of far higher social standing than yourself would jump at such a chance. But you—you take upon yourself to refuse it. I desire to know why."

He spoke with a stubbornness that overbore all bodily weakness. He would be a tyrant to his last breath.

But Avery could not bring herself to answer him. She felt as if he were trying to force his way into a place which she regarded as peculiarly sacred, from which in some fashion she owed it to Piers as well as to herself to bar him out.

"I am sorry," she said gently after a moment, "but I am afraid that is just what I can't tell you."

She saw Sir Beverley's chin thrust out at just the indomitable angle with which Piers had made her familiar, and she realized that he had no intention of abandoning his point.

"You told him, I suppose?" he demanded gruffly.

A faint sense of amusement arose within her, her anxiety notwithstanding. It struck her as ludicrous that she should be browbeaten on this point.

She made answer with more assurance. "I told him that the idea was unsuitable, out of the question; that he ought to marry a girl of his own age and station—not a middle-aged widow like me."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Sir Beverley impatiently. "You belong to the same generation, don't you? What more do you want?"

If he had slapped her face, Avery would scarcely have felt more amazed. She gazed at him in silence, wondering if she could have heard aright.

Sir Beverley frowned upon her fiercely, the iron will of him scorning and surmounting his physical weakness.

"You've got nothing against the boy, I suppose?" he pursued, with the evident determination to get at the truth despite all opposition. "He has never given you any cause for complaint? He's behaved himself like a gentleman, hey?"

"Oh, of course, of course!" Avery said in distress. "It's not that!"

Sir Beverley frowned still more heavily. "Then—what the devil is it?" he demanded. "Don't you like him well

enough? Aren't you—in love with him?" His lips curled ironically over the words; they sounded inexpressibly bitter.

Avery's eyes fell before his pitiless stare. She began with fingers that trembled to pluck the primroses that grew in a large tuft close to her, saying no word.

"Well?" said Sir Beverley, with growing impatience.

She kept her eyes lowered, for she felt she could not meet his look as she made reluctant answer: "No, it is not either. In fact, if I were a girl—if I had not been married before—I think I should say Yes. But—but"—she paused, searching for words, striving to restrain a rising agitation—"as it is, I don't think it would be quite fair to him. I don't know if I could make him happy. I am not young enough, fresh enough, gay enough. I can't offer him a girl's first love, and that is what he ought to have. I so want him to have the best. I so want him to be happy."

The words were out with a rush, almost before she was aware of uttering them, and suddenly her eyes were full of tears, tears that caught her off her guard, so that she had neither time nor strength to check them. She turned quickly from him, fighting for self-control.

Sir Beverley uttered a grunt that might have denoted either surprise or disgust, and there followed a silence that she found peculiarly difficult to bear.

"So," he said at last, in a tone that was strictly devoid of feeling, "you care for him too much to marry him? Is that it?"

It sounded preposterous, but she was still too near tears for any sense of humour to penetrate her distress. She felt as if he had remorselessly wrested from her and dragged to light a treasure upon which she herself had scarcely dared to look. She continued feverishly to pluck the pale flowers that grew all about them, her eyes fixed upon her task.

With a growling effort, Sir Beverley raised himself, thrust forward a quivering hand and gripped hers.

Startled, she turned towards him, meeting not hostility, but a certain grim kindliness in the hard old eyes.

"Will you honour me with your attention for a moment?" he asked, with ironical courtesy.

"I am attending," she answered meekly.

"Then," he said, dropping all pretence at courtesy without further ceremony, "permit me to say that if you don't

marry my grandson, you'll be a bigger fool than I take you for. And in my opinion, a sober-minded woman like you, who will see to his comfort and be faithful to him, is more likely to make him happy than any of your headlong, flighty girls."

He stopped, but he did not relinquish his hold upon her. There was to Avory something oddly pathetic in the close grasp of those unsteady fingers. It was as if they made an appeal which he would have scorned to utter.

"You really wish me to marry him?" she said.

He snarled at her like a surly dog. "Wish it? I! Good heavens above, if I had my way I'd never let him marry at all! But unfortunately circumstances demand it; and the boy himself—the boy himself, well"—his voice softened imperceptibly, rasped on a note of tenderness—"he wants looking after; he's young, you know. He'll be all alone very soon, and—it isn't considered good for a man to live alone—not a young man, anyway."

He broke off, still looking hard at Avery from under his drawn white brows, as if daring her to dispute the matter.

But she said nothing, and after a moment he resumed more equably: "That's all I have to say on the subject. I wish you to understand that for the boy's sake—and for other considerations—I have withdrawn my opposition. You can marry him—as soon as you like."

He sank down again on his elbow, and she saw a look of exhaustion on his face. His head drooped forward on his chest, and, watching him, she realized that he was an old, old man and very tired of life.

Suddenly he jerked his head up again and met her pitying eyes.

"I'm done, yes," he said grimly, as if in response to her unspoken thought. "But I've paid my debts—all of 'em, including this last." His voice began to fail, but he forced it on, speaking spasmodically, with increasing difficulty. "You sent my boy back to me—the other day—against his will. Now I—make you a present of him—in return. There's good stuff in the lad—nothing shabby about him. If you care for him at all—you ought to be able to hold him—make him happy. Anyway—anyway—you might try!"

The appeal in the last words, whispered though they were, was undisguised; and swiftly, impulsively, almost before she knew what she was doing, Avery responded to it.

"Oh, I will try!" she said very earnestly. "I will indeed!"

He looked at her fixedly for a moment with eyes of deep searching that she never forgot, and then his head dropped forward heavily.

"You—have—said it!" he said, and sank unconscious upon the ground.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE MESSAGE

"MY good Mrs. Denys, it is quite fruitless for you to argue the matter. Nothing you can say can alter the fact that you took the children trespassing in the Rodding Park preserves against my most stringent commands, and this deplorable accident to the Squire is the direct outcome of the most flagrant insubordination. I have borne a good deal from you, but this I cannot overlook. You will therefore take a month's notice from to-day, and as it is quite impossible for me to reconsider my decision in this respect, it would be wasted effort on your part to lodge any appeal against it. As for the children, I shall deal with them in my own way."

The Vicar's thin lips closed upon the words with the severity of an irrevocable resolution. Avery heard him with a sense of wild rebellion at her heart, to which she knew she must not give rein. She stood before him, a defenceless culprit brought up for punishment.

It was difficult to be dignified under such circumstances, but she did her best.

"I am extremely sorry that I took the children into the preserves," she said. "But I accept the full responsibility for having done so. They were not greatly to blame in the matter."

"Upon that point," observed Mr. Lorimer, "I am the best judge. The children will be punished as severely as I deem necessary. Meantime, you quite understand, do you not, that your duties here must terminate a month from now? I am only sorry that I allowed myself to be persuaded to reconsider my decision on the last occasion. For more than one reason I think it is to be regretted. How-

ever——" He completed the sentence with a heavy sigh and said no more.

It was evident that he desired to close the interview, yet Avery lingered. She could not go with the children's fate still in the balance.

He looked at her interrogatively with raised brows.

"You will not surely punish the children very severely?" she said.

He waved a hand of cool dismissal. "I shall do whatever seems to me right and advisable," he said.

It came to Avery that interference on this subject would do more harm than good, and she turned to go. At the door his voice arrested her. "This day month, then, Mrs. Denys!"

She bent her head in silent acquiescence, and went out.

In the passage Gracie awaited her and wound eager arms about her.

"Was he very horrid to you, Avery darling? What did he say?"

Avery went with her to the schoolroom, where the other offenders were assembled. It seemed to her almost cruel to attempt to suppress the truth, but their reception of it went to her heart. Jeanie—the placid, sweet-tempered Jeanie—wept tears of such anguished distress that she feared she would make herself ill. Gracie was too angry to weep. She wanted to go straight to the study and beard the lion in his den, and only Avery's most strenuous opposition restrained her. And into the midst of their tribulation came Mrs. Lorimer to mingle her tears with theirs.

"What I shall do without you, Avery, I can't think," was the burden of her lament.

Avery couldn't think either, for she knew better even than Mrs. Lorimer herself how much the latter had come to lean upon her.

She had to turn her energies to comforting her disconsolate companions, but this task was still unaccomplished when the door opened and the Vicar stalked in upon them.

He observed his wife's presence with cold displeasure, and at once proceeded to dismiss her.

"I desire your presence in the study for a few moments, Adelaide. Perhaps you will be kind enough to precede me thither."

He held the door open for her with elaborate ceremony,

and Mrs. Lorimer had no choice but to obey. She departed with a scared effort to check her tears under the stern disapproval of his look.

He closed the door upon her and advanced to the table, gazing round upon them with judicial severity.

"I am here," he announced, "to pass sentence."

Jeanie, crying softly in her corner, made desperate attempts to control herself under the awful look that was at this point concentrated upon her.

After a pause the Vicar proceeded, with a spiteful glance at Avery: "It is my intention to impose a holiday-task of sufficient magnitude to keep you all out of mischief during the rest of the holidays. You will therefore commit to memory various different portions of Milton's 'Paradise Lost,' which I shall select, and which must be repeated to me in their entirety without mistake on my return from my own hard-earned holiday. And let me give you all fair warning," he raised his voice and looked round again, regarding poor Jeanie with marked austerity, "that if any one of you is not word-perfect in his or her task by the day of my return—boy or girl I care not, the offence is the same—he or she will receive a sound caning and the task will be returned."

Thus he delivered himself and turned to go, but paused at the door to add: "Also, Mrs. Denys, will you be good enough to remember that it is against my express command that either you or any of the children should enter any part of Rodding Park during my absence. I desire that to be clearly understood."

"It is understood," said Avery in a low voice.

"That is well," said the Reverend Stephen, and walked majestically from the room.

A few seconds of awed silence followed his departure; then to Avery's horror Gracie snatched off one of her shoes and flung it violently at the door that he had closed behind him. Luckily for Gracie, her father was at the foot of the stairs before this episode took place and beyond earshot also of the furious storm of tears that followed it, with which even Avery found it difficult to cope.

It had been a tragic day throughout, and she was thankful when at length it drew to a close.

But when night came at last, and she lay down in the darkness, she found herself much too full of thought for sleep.

Till then she had not had time to review the day's happenings, but they crowded upon her as she lay, driving away all possibility of repose.

What was she going to do? Over and over again she asked herself the question, bringing herself as it were each time to contemplate afresh the obstacle that had arisen in her path. Had she really promised to marry Piers? The Squire evidently thought she had. The memory of those last words of his came back to her again and again. He had been very much in earnest, very anxious to provide for his boy's future, desperately afraid of leaving him alone. How would he view his impetuous action, she wondered, on the morrow? Had he not even now possibly begun to repent? Would he really desire her to take him literally?

And Piers—what of Piers? A sudden, warm thrill ran through her. She glowed from head to foot. She had not seen Piers since that morning by the sea. She had a feeling that he was purposely avoiding her, and yet deep in the secret heart of her she knew that what she had rejected over and over again was still irrevocably her own. He would come back to her. She knew he would come back. And again that strange warmth filled her veins. The memory of him just then was like a burst of sunshine after a day of storm.

He had not been at home when Julian had taken the news of the Squire's accident to the Abbey, and only men-servants had come to the rescue. She had accompanied them part of the way back, but Tudor had overtaken them in the drive, and she and the boys had turned back. Sir Beverley had been exhausted and but half-conscious, and he had not uttered another word to her. She wished Dr. Tudor had looked in on his way home, and then wondered if the Squire's condition were such as to necessitate his spending the night at the Abbey. He had once told her that Sir Beverley suffered from a weakness of the heart which might develop seriously at any time; but though himself fully aware of the fact, the old man had never permitted Piers to be told. She had deemed it unfair to Piers, but it was no matter for interference. A great longing to know what was happening possessed her. Surely—surely Mr. Lorimer would send up in the morning to inquire!

Her thoughts took another turn. She had been given

definite notice to go. In her efforts to console Mrs. Lorimer and the children she had scarcely herself realised all that it would imply. She began to picture the parting, and a quiver of pain went through her. How they had all grown about her heart! How would she bear to say good-bye to her little delicate Jeanie? And how would the child fare without her? She hardly dared to think.

And then again that blinding ray of sunshine burst riotously through her clouds. If the impossible happened, if she ever married Piers—for the first time she deliberately faced and contemplated the thought—would she not be at least within reach if trouble came? A little thrill of spiteful humour ran through her at this point. She was quite sure that under such circumstances she would not be refused admittance to the Vicar's home. As Piers' wife, its doors would always be open to her.

As Piers' wife! She found herself repeating the words, repeating and repeating them till their strangeness began to give place to a certain familiarity. Was it after all true, as he had once so vehemently asserted, that they were meant for each other, belonged to each other, that the fate of each was bound in that of the other? What if she were a woman grown? What if her years outnumbered his? Had he not waked in her such music as her soul had never known before? Had he not opened for her the gates of the forbidden land? And was there, after all, any actual reason that she should refuse to enter? That land where the sun shone always and the flowers bloomed without fading! That land where it was always spring!

There came in her soul a sudden swift ecstasy that was like the singing of many birds in the dawning, thrilling her through and through. She rose from her bed as though in answer to a call, and went to her open window.

There before her, silver against the darkness, there shone a single star. The throbbing splendour of it seemed to pierce her. She held her breath as one waiting for a message.

And, as she stood waiting, through her heart softly, triumphantly, the message came, spoken in the voice she had come to hear through all other voices.

"It is the Star of Hope, Avery—yours—and mine."

But even as she watched, with all her spirit a-quiver with the wonder of it, the vision passed; the star was veiled.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE DARK HOUR

AVERY was very early at the church on the following morning, and had begun the work of decorating even before Miss Whalley appeared on the scene. It was a day of showers and fleeting gleams of sunshine, and the interior of the little building flashed from gloom to brilliance, and from brilliance back to gloom with fitful frequency.

Daffodils and primroses were littered all around Avery, and a certain subdued pleasure was hers as she decked the place with the spring flowers. She was quite alone, for by the Vicar's inflexible decree all the elder children, with the exception of Olive, were confined to the schoolroom for the morning with their respective tasks.

The magnitude of these tasks had struck dismay to Avery's heart. She did not privately believe that any one of them could ever be accomplished in the prescribed time. But the day of reckoning was not yet, and she put it resolutely from her mind. It was useless to forestall trouble, and her own burden of toil that day demanded all her energies.

The advent of Miss Whalley, thin and acid, put an end to all enjoyment thereof. She bestowed a cool greeting upon Avery, and came at once to her side to criticize her decoration of the font. Miss Whalley always assumed the direction of affairs on these occasions, and she regarded Avery's assistance in the place of Mrs. Lorimer's weak efforts in something of the light of an intrusion.

Avery stood and listened to her suggestions with grave forbearance. She never disputed anything with Miss Whalley, which may have been in part the reason for the latter's somewhat suspicious attitude towards her.

They were still standing before the font while Miss Whalley unfolded her scheme when there came the sound of feet in the porch, and Lennox Tudor put his head in.

His eyes fell at once upon Avery. He hesitated a moment, then entered.

She turned eagerly to meet him. "Oh, how is the Squire this morning? Have you been up to the Abbey yet?"

"The Squire!" echoed Miss Whalley. "Is he ill? I was not aware of it."

Avery's eyes were fixed on Tudor's face, and all in a moment she realized that he had been up all night.

He did not seem to notice Miss Whalley, but spoke to her, and her alone. "I have just come back from the Abbey. The Squire died about an hour ago."

"The Squire!" said Miss Whalley again, in staccato tones.

Avery said nothing, but she turned suddenly white—so white that Tudor was moved to compunction.

"I shouldn't have blurted it out like that. Sit down! The poor old chap never rallied really. He had a little talk with Piers half an hour or so before he went. But it was only the last flicker of the candle. We couldn't save him."

He bent down over her. "Don't look like that! It wasn't your fault. It was bound to come. I've foreseen it for some little time. I told him it was madness to go out riding as he did; but he wouldn't listen to me. Avery, I say! Avery!" His voice sank to an undertone.

She forced her stiff lips to smile faintly in answer to the concern it held. With an effort she commanded herself.

"What of Piers?" she said.

He stood up again with a sharp gesture, and turned from her to answer Miss Whalley's eager questions.

"Surely it is very sudden!" the latter was saying. "How did it happen? Will there be an inquest?"

"There will not," said Tudor curtly. "I have been attending the Squire for some time, and I knew that sooner or later this would happen. The Vicar is not here?" He turned again to Avery. "I promised to look in on him on my way back. Shall I find him at the Vicarage?"

He was gone almost before she could answer, and Avery was left on the seat by the door, staring before her with a wildly throbbing heart, still asking herself with a curious insistence: "What of Piers? What of Piers?"

Miss Whalley surveyed her with marked disapproval. She considered it great presumption on Avery's part to be upset by such a matter, and her attitude said as much as

she walked with a stately air down the church and commenced her own self-appointed task of decorating the pulpit.

Avery did not stir for several seconds; and when she did, it was to go to the open door and stand there looking out into the spring sunshine. She felt strangely incapable of grasping what had happened. She could not realize that that dominant personality that had striven with her only yesterday—only yesterday—had passed utterly away in a few hours. It seemed incredible, beyond the bounds of possibility. Again and again Sir Beverley's speech and look returned to her. How emphatic he had been, how resolutely determined to attain his end! He had discharged his obligation, as he had said. He had paid his last debt. And in the payment of it he had laid upon her a burden which she had felt compelled to accept.

Would it prove too much for her, she wondered? Had she yet again taken a false step that could never be retraced? Again the thought of Piers went through her, piercing her like a sword. Piers alone! Piers in trouble! She wished that Dr. Tudor had answered her question, even though she regretted having asked it. How would he bear his solitude, she wondered with an aching heart; and a sudden great longing arose within her to go and comfort him, as she alone possessed the power to comfort? All selfish considerations departed with the thought. She realized poignantly all that Sir Beverley had visualized when he had told her that very soon his boy would be all alone. She knew fully why he had pressed upon her the task of helping Piers through his dark hour. He had known—as she also knew—how sore would be his need of help. And as this came home to her, her strength—that strength which was the patient building of all the years of her womanhood—came back to her, and she felt renewed and unafraid.

She returned to her work with a steadfastness of purpose that even Miss Whalley viewed with distant admiration; working throughout the morning while the minute bell tolled overhead, rendering honour to the departed Squire.

When she left at length to return to the Vicarage for the mid-day meal, her portion was done.

But it was not till night came again that she found time to write the few brief words that she had been revolving in her mind all day long:

"DEAR PIERS,

"I am thinking of you constantly, and longing to help you in your trouble. Let me know if there is anything whatever that I can do, and I shall be ready at any time.

"With love from

"AVERY."

Her face glowed softly over the writing of the note. She slipped out and posted it before she went to bed.

He would get it in the morning, and he would be comforted. For he would understand. She was sure that he would understand.

Of herself all through that second wakeful night she did not think at all, and so no doubts arose to torment her. She lay in a species of tired wonder. She was keeping her promise to the dead man, and in the keeping of it there was peace.

The great square Abbey pew at the top of the church was empty throughout Easter Sunday. A heavy gloom reigned at the Vicarage. Avery and the children were in dire disgrace, and Mrs. Lorimer spent most of the day in tears. She could not agree with the Vicar that they were directly responsible for the Squire's death. Dr. Tudor had been very emphatic in assuring them that what had happened had been the inevitable outcome of a disease of long standing. But this assurance did not in any way modify the Vicar's attitude, and he decided that the five children should spend their time in solitary confinement until after the day fixed for the funeral.

This was to be Easter Tuesday, and he himself had arranged to depart the day after—an event to which the entire household, with the single exception of Olive, looked forward with the greatest eagerness.

No message came from Piers that night, and Avery wondered a little, but without uneasiness. He must have so very much to think of and do at such a time, she reflected. He would scarcely even have begun to feel the dreadful loneliness.

But when the next day passed, and still no answer came, a vague anxiety awoke within her. Surely her message had reached him! Surely he must have read it! The Piers she knew would have dashed off some species of reply at once. How was it he delayed?

The day of the funeral came, and the Easter flowers were all taken away. The Vicarage blinds were drawn, the bell tolled again, and Jeanie, weighed down with a dreadful sense of wickedness, lay face downwards on the schoolroom sofa and wept and wept.

Avery was very anxious about her. The disgrace and punishment of the past few days had told upon her. She was sick with trouble and depression, and she could find no means of comforting her. She had meant herself to slip out and to go to the funeral for Piers' sake, but she felt she could not leave the child. So she sat with her in the darkened room, listening to her broken sobbing, aware that in the solitude of her room Gracie was crying too, and longing passionately to gather together all five of the luckless offenders and deliver them from their land of bondage.

But there was to be no deliverance that day, or any lightening of the burden. The funeral over, the Vicar returned, and sent for each child separately to the study for prayer and admonition. Jeanie was the last to face this ordeal, and before it was half over Avery was sent for also to find her lying on the study sofa in a dead faint.

Avery's indignation was intense, but she could not give it vent. Even the Vicar was a little anxious, and when Avery's efforts succeeded at length in restoring her, he reprimanded Jeanie severely and reduced her once more to tears of uncontrollable distress.

The long, dreary day came to an end at last, and the thought of a happier morrow comforted them all. But Avery, though she slept that night, was troubled by a dream that came to her over and over again throughout the long hours. She seemed to see Piers, as he had once described himself, a prisoner behind bars; and ever as she looked upon him he strove with gigantic efforts that were wholly vain to force the bars asunder and come to her. She could not help him, could not even hear his voice. But the agony of his eyes haunted her—haunted her. She awoke at last in anguish of spirit, and slept no more.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE SUMMONS

WITH the morning came a general feeling of relief. The Vicar was almost jocose, and Mrs. Lorimer made timid attempts to be mirthful, though the parting with her children sorely tried her fortitude.

The boys' spirits were subdued, but they burst forth uproariously as soon as the station-cab was well outside the gate. Ronald and Julian cheered themselves hoarse, and Pat scuttled off to the back of the house to release Mike from his chain to participate in the great rejoicing.

There was no disguising the fact that everyone was pleased—everyone except Olive, who went away to her father's study, which had been left in her especial charge, and locked herself in for a morning of undisturbed reading.

Avery could not feel joyful. The thought of Piers was still with her continually. She had heard so little of him—merely that he had followed his grandfather to the grave supported by the old family solicitor from Wardenhurst, Lennox Tudor, and a miscellaneous throng of neighbours; that he had borne himself without faltering, and had gone back to his solitude with no visible sign of suffering. Only indirectly had she heard this, and she yearned to know more.

She knew that, like herself, he was practically devoid of relatives—the last of his race—a figure of splendid isolation that would appeal to many. She knew that as a wealthy and unmarried baronet he would be greatly sought after and courted; made much of by the whole county, and half London as well. He was so handsome, so romantic, so altogether eligible in every way. Was it for this that he had left that note of hers unanswered? Did he think that now that his horizon had widened the nearer haven was hardly worth attaining? Above all, if he decided to take that which she had so spontaneously offered, would it satisfy him? Would he be content therewith? Had she not done better to have waited till he came again to ask of her that which she had till the day of his bereavement withheld?

It was useless to torture herself with such questionings.

Because of her promise to the dead, she had acted, and she could now but await the result of her action. If he never answered—well, she would understand.

So passed yet another day of silence.

She was busy with the household accounts that night, which Mrs. Lorimer in her woe had left in some confusion, and they kept her occupied till long after the children had gone to bed, so late, indeed, that the servants also had retired and she was left alone in the dining-room to wrestle with her difficulties.

She found it next to impossible to straighten out the muddle, and she came at length reluctantly to the conclusion that it was beyond her powers. Wondering what the Reverend Stephen would have said to such a crime, she abstracted a few shillings from her own purse and fraudulently made up the deficit that had vexed Mrs. Lorimer's soul.

"I can write and tell her now that it has come right," she murmured to herself, as she rose from the table.

It was close upon eleven o'clock. The house was shuttered and silent. The stillness was intense, when suddenly, as she was in the act of lighting a candle, the electric bell pinged through the quiet of the night.

She started and listened. The thought of Piers sprang instinctively to her mind. Could it be he? But surely even Piers would not come to her at this hour! It must be some parishioner in need of help.

She turned to answer the summons, but ere she reached the hall it was repeated twice, with nervous insistence. She hastened to withdraw the bolts and open the door.

At once a voice accosted her, and a sharp pang of disappointment or anxiety, she knew not which, went through her.

"Mrs. Denys, is she here?" it said. "May I speak with her?"

It was the unmistakable speech of a Frenchman. By the light of the hall-lamp, Avery saw the plump, anxious face and little pointed moustache of the speaker. He entered uninvited and stood before her.

"Ah! But you are Mrs. Denys!" he exclaimed with relief. "*Madame*, I beg that you will pardon me! I am come to you in distress the most profound. You will listen to me, yes?"

He regarded her with quick black eyes that both confided and besought. Avery's heart was beating in great throbs; she felt strangely breathless and uncertain of herself.

"Where do you come from?" she said. "Who are you?"

But she knew the answer before it came. "I am Victor, *madame*—Victor Lagarde. I am the valet of *Monsieur Pierre* almost since he was born. He calls me his *bonne!*" A brief smile touched his worried countenance and was gone. "And now I am come to you, *madame*—not by his desire. *Mais non*, he does not know even that I am here. But because he is in great, great misery, and I cannot console him. I have not the power. And he is all alone—all alone. And I fear—I fear——" He broke off with eloquent hands outspread. Avery saw the tears standing in his eyes.

She closed the door softly. "What is it?" she said. "Tell me what you fear!"

He looked at her, mastering his emotion with difficulty. "*Madame, Monsieur Pierre* has sentiments the most profound. He feel—*passionnément*. He try to hide his sentiments from me. But me—I know. He sit alone in the great hall and look—and look. He sleep—never at all. He will not even go to bed. And in the great hall is an escritoire, and in it a drawer." Victor's voice sank mysteriously. "To-night—when he think he is alone—he open that drawer, and I see inside. It hold a revolver, *madame*. And he look at it, touch it, and then shake his head. But I am so afraid—so afraid. So—*enfin*—in my trouble I come to you. You have the influence with him, is it not so? You have—the power to console. *Madame—chère madame*—will you not come and speak with him for five little minutes? Just to encourage him, *madame*, in his sadness; for he is all alone!"

The tears ran down Victor's troubled face as he made his earnest appeal. He mopped them openly, making no secret of his distress, which was too pathetic to be ludicrous.

Avery looked at him in dismay. She knew not what to say or do; and even as she stood irresolute the hall-clock struck eleven through the silence of the house.

Victor watched her anxiously. "*Madame* is married," he insinuated. "She can please herself—no? And *Monsieur Pierre*——"

"Wait a minute, please!" she interrupted gently. "I want to think."

She went to the unlatched door and stood with her face to the night. She felt as if a call had come to her, but somehow—for no selfish reason—she hesitated to answer. Some unknown influence held her back.

Victor came softly up and stood close to her. "*Madame*," he said in a whisper, "I tell you a secret—I, Victor, who have known *Monsieur Pierre* from his infancy. He loves you, *madame*. He loves you much. *C'est la grande passion* which comes only once in a life—only once."

The low words went through her, seeming to sink into her very heart. She made a slight, involuntary gesture as of wincing. There was something in them that was almost more than she could bear.

She stood motionless with the chill night-air blowing in upon her, trying to collect her thoughts, trying to bring herself to face and consider the matter before she made her decision. But it was useless. Those last words had awaked within her a greater force than she could control. From the moment of their utterance she was driven irresistibly, the decision was no longer her own.

Piers was alone. Piers loved her—wanted her. His soul cried to hers through the darkness. She saw him again as in her dream wrestling with those cruel iron bars, striving with vain agony to reach her. And all doubt went from her like a cloud.

She turned to Victor with grey eyes shining and resolute. "Let us go!" she said.

She took a cloak from a peg in the hall, lowered the light, took the key from the lock, and passed out into the dark.

Victor followed her closely, softly latching the door behind him. He had known from the outset that the English *madame* would not be able to resist his appeal. Was not *Monsieur Pierre* as handsome and as desirable as though he had been a prince of the blood? He walked a pace behind her, saying no word, fully satisfied with the success of his mission.

Avery went with swift, unerring feet; yet it seemed to her afterwards as if she had moved in a dream, for only the vaguest impression of that journey through the night remained with her. It was dark, but the darkness did not hinder her. She went as if drawn irresistibly—even against her will. At the back of her mind hovered the consciousness

that she was doing a rash thing, but the woman's heart in her was too deeply stirred to care for minor considerations. The picture of Piers in his lonely hall hung ever before her, drawing her on.

He had not sent for her. She knew now that he would not send. Yet she went to him on winged feet. For she knew that his need of her was great.

There was no star in the sky and the night wind moaned in the trees as they went up the long chestnut avenue to the Abbey. The loneliness was great. It folded them in on every hand. It seemed to hang like a pall about the great, dim building massed against the sky, as though the whole place lay beneath a spell of mourning.

Emerging from the deep shadow of the trees, she paused for the first time in uncertainty. Victor pressed forward instantly to her side.

"We will enter by the library, *madame*. See, I will show you the way. From there to the great hall, it is only a few steps. And you will find him there. I leave you alone to find him."

He led her across a dew-drenched lawn and up a flight of steps to the door of a conservatory which gave inwards at his touch.

Obedient to his gesture, Avery entered. Her heart was beating hard and fast. She was conscious of a wild misgiving which had not assailed her during all the journey thither. What if he did not want her after all? What if her coming were unwelcome?

Silently Victor piloted her, and she could not choose but follow, though she felt sick with the sudden apprehension that had sprung to life as she left the sleeping world outside. She seemed to be leaving her freedom, all she valued, behind her as she entered this shadowy prison. And all for what? Her quivering heart could find no answer.

There was a heavy scent of hothouse flowers in the air. She almost gasped for breath in the exotic fragrance of the unseen blossoms. A strong impulse possessed her to turn and flee by the way she had come.

"*Madame!*" It was Victor's voice, low and entreating. He had opened an inner door, and stood waiting for her.

Had he seen her wavering resolution, she wondered? Was he trying to hasten her ere it should wholly evaporate—to

close the way of escape ere she could avail herself of it? Or was he anxious solely on Piers' account—lest after all she might arrive too late?

She could not determine, but the urgency of his whisper moved her. She passed him and entered the room beyond.

It was dimly lighted by a single shaded electric lamp that illumined a writing-table. She saw that it was the ancient library of the Abbey, a wonderful apartment, which she knew to contain an almost priceless collection of old parchments. It was lined with bookshelves and had the musty smell inseparable from aged bindings.

Victor motioned her silently to a door at the further end, but before either of them could reach it there came a sudden footfall on the other side, the handle turned sharply, and it opened.

"Ah!" exclaimed Victor, and fell back as one caught red-handed in a crime.

Avery stood quite motionless with her heart beating up against her throat, and a tragic sense of trespass overwhelming her. She could not find a single word to say, so sudden and so terrible was the ordeal. She could only wait in silence.

Piers stood still as one transfixed, with eyes that blazed sleepless out of a drawn, pale face; then at length with a single snap of the fingers imperiously he dismissed Victor by the still open door.

It closed discreetly upon the Frenchman's exit, and then only did Piers move forward; came to Avery, drew her to a chair, knelt mutely down before her, and bowed his head upon her lap.

CHAPTER XXXVII

"LA GRANDE PASSION"

SHE spoke to him at last, half frightened by his silence yet by his attitude wholly reassured. For he wanted her still, of that no doubt remained. His hands were clasped behind her. He could have held her in his arms, but he did not. He only knelt there at her feet in utter silence, his black head pillowed on her hands.

"Piers!" she said. "Piers! Let me help you!"

He groaned in answer, and she felt a great shiver run

through him. She knew intuitively that he was battling for self-control and dared not for the moment show his face.

"You—can't," he said at last.

"But I think I can," she urged gently. "It isn't so very long ago that you wanted me."

"I was an infernal blackguard to tell you so!" he made answer.

And then suddenly his arms tightened about her, and he held her fast. "That you—you, Avery—should come to me—like this!" he said.

She freed one of her hands and laid it on his bent head. "Shall I tell you what made me come, Piers?"

He shook his head in silence, but there was passion in the holding of his arms.

For a space he continued to hold her so, speaking no word, and through his silence there came to her the quick, fierce beat of his heart. Then at length very suddenly, almost with violence, he flung his arms wide and started to his feet.

"Avery," he said, "you were a saint to come to me like this. I shan't forget it ever. But there's nothing—nothing you can do, except leave me to my own devices. It's only just at first, you know, that the loneliness seems so—awful." His voice shook unexpectedly; he swung round away from her and walked to the end of the room.

He came back almost immediately and stood before her. "Victor was a criminal fool to bring you here. He meant well, though. He always does. That note of yours—I ought to have answered it. I was just coming in here to do so. I shouldn't have kept you waiting so long, but somehow—somehow——" Again, in spite of him, his voice quivered. He turned sharply and walked to the fireplace, leaned his arms upon it, and stood so, his back to her, his head bent.

"It was so awfully good of you," he went on after a moment. "You always have been—awfully good. My grandfather realized that, you know. I think he told you so, didn't he? He wasn't really sorry that I wouldn't marry Ina Rose. By the way, she is engaged to Dick Guyes already, so there was not much damage done in that direction. I told you it was nothing but a game, didn't I? You didn't quite believe me—what?"

It came to her that he was talking to gain time, that he

was trying to muster strength to give the lie to the passion that had throbbed in the holding of his arms, that for some reason he deemed it incumbent upon him to mask his feelings and hide from her the misery that had driven Victor in search of her.

She rose quietly and moved across the room till she stood beside him. "Piers," she said, "tell me what is wrong!"

He stiffened at her approach, straightened himself, faced her. "Avery," he said, "do you know, dear, it would be better if you went straight back again? I hate to say it. It was so dear of you, so—so—great of you to come. But—no, there's nothing wrong—nothing, that is, that hasn't been wrong for ages. Fact is, I'm not fit to speak to you, never have been; far less make love to you. And I was a cur and a brute to do it. I've had a bit of a shake-up lately. It's made me feel my responsibilities, see things as they are. I've got an awful lot to see to just now. I'm going to work mighty hard. I mustn't think of—other things."

He stopped. He was looking at her, looking at her, with the red fire of passion kindling in his eyes, a gleam so fierce and so insistent that she was forced to lower her own. It was as if his soul cried out to her all that he restrained his lips from uttering.

He saw her instinctive avoidance of his gaze, and turned away from her, leaning again upon the mantelpiece as if spent.

"I can't help it, Avery. I'm so dog-tired, and I can't sleep. I'm horribly sorry, but I'm nothing but a brute-beast to-night. Really—really—you had better go."

There was desperation in his voice. He bowed his head upon his arms, and she saw that his hands were clenched.

But she could not leave him so. That inner urging that had impelled her thither warned her to remain, even against her own judgment, even against her will. The memory of Victor's fears came back to her. She could not turn and go.

"My dear boy," she said, speaking very gently, "do you think I don't know that you are miserable, lonely, wretched? That is why I am here!"

"God knows how lonely!" he whispered.

Her heart stirred within her at the desolation of the words. "Nearly all of us go through it some time," she said gently. "And if there isn't a friend to stand by, it's very hard to

bear. That is the part I want to play—if you will let me. Won't you treat me as a friend?"

But Piers neither moved nor spoke. With his head still upon his arms he stood silent.

She drew nearer to him. "Piers, I think I understand. I think you are a little afraid of going too far, of—of"—her voice faltered a little in spite of her—"of hurting my feelings. Is that it? Because, my dear, you needn't be afraid any longer. If you really think I can make you happy, I am willing—quite willing—to try."

The words were spoken, and with them she offered all she had, freely, generously, with a quick love that was greater possibly than even she realized.

She was standing close to him, waiting for him to turn and clasp her in his arms, as he had so nearly clasped her once against her will. But seconds passed and he did not move, and a cold foreboding began to knock at her heart lest after all—lest after all—his love for her had waned.

He stirred at last, just as she was on the point of turning from him, stretched out a groping hand that found and drew her to his side. But still he did not look at her or so much as raise his head.

He spoke after a moment in a choked voice that seemed to be wrung from him by sheer physical torture. "Avery, don't—don't tempt me. I—daren't!"

The anguish of the words went through her, banishing all thought of anything else. Very suddenly she knew that he was fighting a desperate battle for her sake, that he was striving with all the strength that was in him to set her happiness before his own. And something that was greater than pity entered into her with the knowledge, something so great as to be all-possessing, compelling her to instant action.

She slipped her arm about his bent shoulders with a gesture of infinite tenderness. "Piers—dear boy, what is it?" she said softly. "Is there some trouble in your past—something you can't bear to speak of? Remember, I am not a girl, I may understand—some things—better than you think."

She felt his hold upon her tighten almost convulsively, but for a while he made no answer.

Then at length slowly he raised his head and looked at her. "Do you—really—think the past matters?" he said.

She met his eyes with their misery and their longing, and a tremor of uncertainty went through her.

"Tell me, Avery!" he insisted. "If you felt yourself able to get away from old burdens, and if—if there was no earthly reason why they should hamper your future——" He broke off, and again his arms tightened. "It's damnable that they should!" he muttered savagely.

"My dear, I don't know how to answer you," she said. "Are you afraid to be open with me? Do you think I shouldn't understand?"

His eyes fell abruptly. "I am quite sure," he said, "that it would be easier for me to give you up." And with that he suddenly set her free and stood up before her, straight and stiff. "Let me see you home!" he said.

They faced one another in the dimness, and Avery marked afresh the weariness of his face. He looked like a man who had come through many days and nights of suffering.

He glanced up as she did not speak. "Shall we go?" he said.

But Avery stood hesitating, asking herself if this could indeed be the end, if the impulse that had drawn her thither had been after all a mistaken one, or if even yet it might not carry her further than she had ever thought to go.

He turned towards the conservatory door by which she had entered, and quietly opened it. A soft wind blew through to her, laden with the scent of the wet earth and a thousand opening buds. It seemed to carry the promise of eternal hope on unseen wings straight to her heart.

Slowly she followed him across the room, reached him, passed through into the scented darkness. A few steps more and she would have been in the open air, but she was uncertain of the way. The place was too dim for her to see it. She paused for him to guide her.

The door closed behind her; she heard it softly swing on its hinges, and then came his light footfall close to her.

"Straight on!" he said, and his voice sounded oddly cold and constrained. "There are three steps at the end. Be careful how you go! Perhaps you would rather wait while I fetch a light."

His tone hurt her subtly, wounding her more deeply than she had realized that he had it in his power to wound.

She moved forward blindly with a strangled sensation at her throat and a rush of hot tears in her eyes. She had never dreamed that Piers—the warm-hearted, the eager—had it in him to treat her so.

The instinct to escape awoke within her. She quickened her steps and reached the further door. Before her lay the open night, immense and quiet and very dark. She pressed forward, hoping he would not follow, longing only for solitude and silence.

But in her agitation she forgot his warning, forgot to tread warily, and missed her footing on the steps. She slipped with a sharp exclamation and went down, catching vainly at the door-post to save herself.

Piers exclaimed also, and sprang forward. His arms were about her before she reached the ground. He lifted her bodily ere she could recover her balance; and suddenly she knew that with the touch of her the fire of his passion had burst into scorching flame—knew herself powerless—a woman in the hold of her captor.

For he held her so fast that she gasped for breath, and with her head pressed back against his shoulder, he kissed her on the lips, fiercely, violently, hungrily—kissed her eyes, her hair, and again her lips, sealing them closely with his own, making protest impossible. Neither could she resist him, for he held her gathered up against his heart, bearing her whole weight with a strength that mocked her weakness, compelling her to lie at his mercy while the wild storm of his passion swept on its way.

She was as one caught in the molten stream of a volcano, and carried by the fiery current that seethed all about her, consuming her with its heat.

Once when his lips left hers she tried to whisper his name, to call him back from his madness; but her voice was gone. She could only gasp and gasp till with an odd, half-savage laugh he silenced her again with those burning kisses that made her feel that he had stormed his way to the last and inner sanctuary of her soul, depriving her even of the right to dispute his overwhelming possession.

Later it seemed to her that she must have been near to fainting, for though she knew that he bore her inwards from the open door, she could not so much as raise a hand in protest. She was utterly spent and almost beyond caring.

so complete had been his conquest. When he set her on her feet she tottered, clinging to him nervelessly for support.

He kept his arm about her, but his hold was no longer insistent. She was aware of his passion still; it seemed to play around her like a lambent flame; but the first fierce flare was past. He spoke to her at last in a voice that was low but not without the arrogance of the conqueror.

"Are you very angry with me, I wonder?"

She did not answer him, for still she could not.

He went on, a vein of recklessness running through his speech. "It won't make any difference if you are. Do you understand? I've tried to let you go, but I can't. I must have you or die."

He paused a moment, and it seemed as if the tornado of his passion were sweeping back again; but, curiously, he checked it.

"That's how it is with me, Avery," he said. "The Fates have played a ghastly joke on me, but you are mine in spite of it. You came to tell me so; didn't you?"

Was there a note of pleading in his voice? She fancied so; but still she could not speak in answer. She leaned against him with every pulse throbbing. She dared not turn her face to his.

"Are you afraid of me, Avery?" he said, and this time surely she heard a faint echo of that boyish humour that had first won her. "Because it's all right, dear," he told her softly. "I've got myself in hand now. You know, I couldn't hold you in my arms just then and not—not kiss you. You don't hate me for it, do you? You—understand?"

Yes, she understood. Yet she felt as if he had raised a barrier between them which nothing could ever take away. She tried to ignore it, but could not. The glaring fact that he had not cared how much or how little she had desired those savage kisses of his had begun already to torment her, and she knew that she would carry the scorching memory of those moments with her for the rest of her life.

She drew herself slowly from him. "I am going now," she said.

He put out a hand that trembled and laid it on her shoulder. "If I will let you go, Avery!" he said, and she was again aware of the leaping of the flame that had scarcely died down but a moment before.

She straightened herself and resolutely faced him. "I am going, Piers," she said.

His hand tightened sharply. He caught his breath for a few tense seconds. Then very slowly his hold relaxed; his hand fell. "You will let me see you back," he said, and she knew by his voice that he was putting strong force upon himself.

She turned. "No! I will go alone."

He did not move. "Please, Avery!" he said.

Her heart gave a quick throb at the low-spoken words. She paused almost involuntarily, realizing with a great rush of thankfulness that he would not stir a step to follow unless she gave him leave.

For an instant she stood irresolute. Then: "Come if you wish!" she said.

She heard him move, and herself passed on, descending the steps into the dewy garden with again that odd feeling of unreality, almost as if she walked in a dream.

He came behind her, silent as a shadow, and not till she deliberately waited for him did he overtake and walk beside her.

No words passed between them as they went. They seemed to move through a world of shadows—a spell-bound, waiting world. And gradually, as if a soothing hand had been laid upon her, Avery felt the wild tumult at her heart subside. She remembered that he had refrained himself almost at her first word, and slowly her confidence came back. He had appealed to her to understand, and she could not let his appeal go wholly unanswered.

As they passed at length through the gate that led into the Vicarage lane, she spoke: "Piers, I am not angry."

"Aren't you?" he said, and by the eager relief of his voice she knew that her silence had been hard to bear.

She put out a hand to him as they walked. "But, Piers, that—is not the way to make me love you."

"I know—I know," he said quickly, and then haltingly: "I've been—so beastly lonely, Avery. Make allowances for me—forgive me!"

He had not taken her hand; she slipped it into his. "I do," she said simply. She felt his fingers close tensely, but in a moment they opened again and set her free.

He did not utter another word, merely walked on beside her

till they reached the Vicarage gate. She thought he would have left her there, but he did not. They went up the drive together to the porch.

From his kennel at the side of the house Mike barked a sharp challenge that turned into an unmistakable note of welcome as they drew near. Avery silenced him with a reassuring word.

She found the key, and in the darkness of the porch she began to fumble for the lock.

Piers stooped. "Let me!"

She gave him the key, and as she stood up again she noted the brightness of the fanlight over the door. She thought that she had lowered the light at leaving; she had certainly intended to do so.

Very softly Piers opened the door. It swung noiselessly back upon its hinges, and the full light smote upon them.

In the same instant a slim, white figure came calmly forward through the hall and stopped beneath the lamp.

Olive Lorimer, pale, severe, with fixed, accusing eyes, stood confronting them.

"Mrs. Denys!" she said, in accents of frozen surprise.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES

THE encounter was so amazing, so utterly unlooked for, that Avery had a moment of downright consternation. The child's whole air and expression were so exactly reminiscent of her father, that she almost felt as if she stood before the Vicar himself—a culprit caught in a guilty act.

She looked at Olive without words, and Olive looked straight back at her with that withering look of the righteous condemning the ungodly which so often regarded a dumb but rebellious congregation through the Vicar's stern eyes.

Piers, however, was not fashioned upon timid lines, and he stepped into the hall without the faintest sign of embarrassment.

"Hullo, little girl!" he said. "Why aren't you in bed?"

The accusing eyes turned upon him. Olive seemed to swell with indignation. "I was in bed long ago," she made

answer, still in those frozen tones. "May I ask what you are doing here, Mr. Evesham?"

"I?" said Piers jauntily. "Now what do you suppose?"

"I cannot imagine," the child said.

"Not really?" said Piers. "Well, perhaps when you are a little older your imagination will develop. In the meantime, if you are a wise little girl, you will run back to bed and leave your elders to settle their own affairs."

Olive drew herself up with dignity. "It is not my intention to go so long as you are in the house," she said with great distinctness.

"Indeed!" said Piers. "And why not?"

He spoke with the utmost quietness, but Avery caught the faintest tremor in his voice that warned her that Olive was treading dangerous ground.

She hastened to intervene. "But of course you are going now," she said to him. "It is bedtime for us all. Good night! And thank you for walking home with me!"

Her own tone was perfectly normal. She turned to him with outstretched hand, but he put it gently aside.

"One minute!" he said. "I should like an answer to my question first. Why are you so determined to see me out of the house?"

He looked straight at Olive as he spoke, no longer careless of mien, but implacable as granite.

Olive, however, was wholly undismayed. She was the only one of the Vicar's children who had never had cause to feel a twinge of fear. "You had better ask yourself that question," she said, in her cool young treble. "You probably know the answer better than I do."

Piers' expression changed. For a single instant he looked furious, but he mastered himself almost immediately. "It's a lucky thing for you that you are not my little girl," he observed grimly. "If you were, you should have the slapping of your life to-night. As it is—well, you have asked me for an explanation of my presence here, and you shall have one. I am here in the capacity of escort to Mrs. Denys. Have you any fault to find with that?"

Olive returned his look steadily with her cold grey eyes, while she considered his words. She seemed momentarily at a loss for an answer, but Piers' first remarks were scarcely of

a character to secure goodwill or allay suspicion. She rapidly made up her mind.

"I shall tell Miss Whalley in the morning," she said. "My father said I was to go to her if anything went wrong." She added with a malevolent glance towards Avery: "I suppose you know that Mrs. Denys is under notice to leave at the end of her month?"

Piers glanced at Avery too—a glance of swift interrogation. She nodded very slightly in answer.

He looked again at Olive with eyes that gleamed in a fashion that few could have met without quailing.

"Is she indeed?" he said. "I venture to predict that she will leave before then. If you are anxious to impart news to Miss Whalley, you may tell her also that Mrs. Denys is going to be my wife, and that the marriage will take place"—he looked at Avery again and all the hardness went out of his face—"just as soon as she will permit."

Dead silence followed the announcement. Avery's face was pale, but there was a faint smile at her lips. She met Piers' look without a tremor. She even drew slightly nearer to him; and he, instantly responding, slipped a swift hand through her arm.

Olive, sternly judicial, stood regarding them in silence, for perhaps a score of seconds. And then, still undismayed, she withdrew her forces in good order from the field.

"In that case," she said, with the air of one closing a discussion, "there is nothing further to be said. I suppose Mrs. Denys wishes to be Lady Evesham. My father told me she was an adventuress. I see he was right."

She went away with this parting shot, stepping high and holding her head poised loftily—an absurd parody of the Vicar in his most clerical moments.

Avery gave a little hysterical gasp of laughter as she passed out of sight.

Piers' arm was about her in a moment. He held her against his heart. "What a charming child—what?" he murmured.

She hid her face on his shoulder. "I think myself she was in the right," she said, still half laughing. "Piers, you must go."

"In a moment. Let me hear from your own dear lips first that you are not—not angry!" He spoke the words

softly into her ear. There was only tenderness in the holding of his arms.

"I am not," she whispered back.

"Nor sorry?" urged Piers.

She turned her face a little towards him. "No, dear, not a bit sorry; glad!"

He held her more closely but with reverence. "Avery, you don't—love me, do you?"

"Of course I do!" she said.

"There can't be any 'of course' about it," he declared almost fiercely. "I've been a positive brute to you. Avery—Avery, I'll never be a brute to you again."

And there he stopped, for her arms were suddenly about his neck, her lips raised in utter surrender to his.

"Oh, Piers," she said in a voice that thrilled him through and through, "do you think I would have less of your love—even if it hurts me? It is the greatest thing that has ever come into my life."

He held her head between his hands and looked into her eyes of perfect trust. "Avery! Avery!" he said.

"I mean it!" she told him earnestly. "I have been drawing nearer to you all the while—in spite of myself—though I tried so hard to hold back. Piers, my past life is a dream, and this—this is the awaking. You asked me—a long while ago—if the past mattered. I couldn't answer you then. I was still half asleep. But now—now you have worked the miracle—my heart is awake, dear, and I will answer you. The past is nothing to you or me. It matters—not—one—jot!"

Her words throbbed into the silence of his kiss. He held her long and closely. Once—twice—he tried to speak to her and failed. In the end he gave himself up mutely to the rapture of her arms. But his own wild passion had sunk below the surface. He sought no more than she offered.

"Say good-bye to me now!" she whispered at length; and he kissed her again closely, lingeringly, and let her go.

She stood in the doorway as he passed into the night, and his last sight of her was thus, silhouetted against the darkness, a tall, gracious figure, bending forward to discern him in the dimness.

He went back to his lonely home, back to the echoing emptiness, the listening dark. He entered again the great

hall where Sir Beverley had been wont to sit and wait for him.

Victor was on the watch. He glided apologetically forward with shining, observant eyes upon his young master's weary face.

"*Monsieur Pierre!*" he said insinuatingly.

Piers looked at him heavily. "Well?"

"I have put some refreshment for you in the dining-room. It is more—more comfortable," said Victor, gently indicating the open door. "Will you not—when you have eaten—go to bed, *mon cher, et peut-être dormir?*"

Very wistfully the little man proffered his suggestion. His eyes followed Piers' movements with the dumb worship of an animal.

"Oh yes, I'll go to bed," said Piers.

He turned towards the dining-room, and entered. There was no elation in his step; rather he walked as a man who carries a heavy burden, and Victor marked the fact with eyes of keen anxiety.

He followed him in and poured out a glass of wine, setting it before him with a professional adroitness that did not conceal his solicitude.

Piers picked up the glass almost mechanically, and in doing so caught sight of some letters lying on the table.

"Oh, damn!" he said wearily. "How many more?"

There were bundles of them on the study writing-table. They poured in by every post.

Victor groaned commiseratingly. "I will take them away, yes?" he suggested. "You will read them in the morning—when you have slept."

"Yes, take 'em away!" said Piers. "Stay a minute! What's that top one? I'll look at that."

He took up the envelope. It was addressed in a man's square, firm writing, to "Piers Evesham, Esqre., Rodding Abbey."

"Someone who doesn't know," murmured Piers, and slit it open with a sense of relief. Some of the letters of condolence that he had received had been as salt rubbed into a wound.

He took out the letter and glanced at the signature: "Edmund Crowther!"

Suddenly a veil seemed to be drawn across his eyes. He

looked up with a sharp, startled movement, and through a floating mist he saw his grandmother's baffling smile from the canvas on the wall. The blood was singing in his ears. He clenched his hands involuntarily. Crowther! He had forgotten Crowther! And Crowther knew—how much?

But he had Crowther's promise of secrecy, so—after all—what had he to fear? Nothing—nothing! Yet he felt as if a devil were laughing somewhere in the room. They had caught him, they had caught him, there at the very gates of deliverance. They were dragging him back to his place of torment. He could hear the clanking of the chains which he had so nearly burst asunder, could feel them coiling cold about his heart. For he also was bound by a promise, the keeping of which meant utter destruction to all he held good in life.

And not that alone. It meant the rending in pieces of that which was holy, the trampling into the earth of that sacred gift which had only now been bestowed upon him. It meant the breaking of a woman's heart—that of the only woman in the world, the woman he worshipped, body and soul, the woman who in spite of herself had come to love him also.

He flung up his arms with a wild gesture. The torment was more than he could bear.

"No!" he cried. "No!" And it was as if he cried out of the midst of a burning, fiery furnace. "I'm damned—I'm damned if I will!"

"*Monsieur Pierre! Monsieur Pierre!*" It was Victor's voice beside him, full of anxious remonstrance.

He looked round with dazed eyes. His arms fell to his sides. "All right, my good Victor! I'm not mad," he said. "Don't be scared! Did you ever hear of a chap called Damocles? He's an ancestor of mine, and history has a funny fashion of repeating itself. But there'll be a difference this time, all the same. He couldn't eat his dinner for fear of a naked sword falling on his head. But I'm going to eat mine—whatever happens; and enjoy it too."

He raised his glass aloft with a reckless laugh. His eyes sought those of the woman on the wall with a sparkle of bitter humour. He made her a brief, defiant bow.

"And you, madam, may look on—and smile!" he said.

He drank the wine without tasting it and swung round to

depart. And again, as he went, it seemed to him that somewhere near at hand—possibly in his own soul—a devil laughed and gibed.

Yet when he lay down at length, he slept for many hours in dreamless, absolute repose—as a voyager who, after long buffeting with wind and tide, has come at last into the quiet haven of his desire.

END OF PART I

PART II

THE PLACE OF TORMENT

CHAPTER I

DEAD SEA FRUIT

"I DOUBT if the county will call," said Miss Whalley, "unless the fact that Sir Piers is to stand for the division weighs with them. And Colonel Rose's patronage may prove an added inducement. He probably knows that the young man has simply married this Mrs. Denys out of pique, since his own charming daughter would have none of him. I must say that personally I am not surprised that Miss Rose should prefer marriage with a man of such sterling worth as Mr. Guyes. Sir Piers may be extremely handsome and fascinating; but no man with those eyes could possibly make a good husband. I hear it is to be a very grand affair indeed, dear Mrs. Lorimer—far preferable in my opinion to the hole-in-a-corner sort of ceremony that took place this morning."

"They both of them wished it to be as quiet as possible," murmured Mrs. Lorimer, "she being a widow, and he—poor lad!—in such deep mourning."

"Indecent haste, I call it," pronounced Miss Whalley severely, "with the earth still fresh on his poor dear grandfather's grave! A May wedding, too! Most unsuitable!"

"He said he was so lonely," pleaded Mrs. Lorimer gently. "And, after all, it was what his grandfather wished—so he told me."

Miss Whalley gave a high-bred species of snort. "My dear Mrs. Lorimer, that young man would tell you anything. Why, his grandfather was an inveterate woman-hater, as all the world knows."

"I know," agreed Mrs. Lorimer. "That was really what made it so remarkable. I assure you, Miss Whalley—Piers came to me only last night and told me with tears in his eyes—that just at the last poor Sir Beverley said to him: 'I believe you've pitched on the right woman after all, lad.

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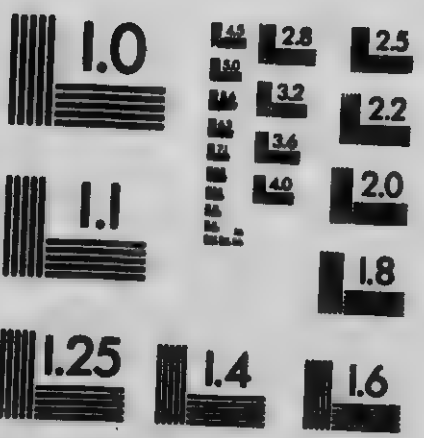

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Anyway, she cares for you—more than ordinary. Marry her as quick as you can—and my blessing on you both!' They were almost the last words he spoke," said Mrs. Lorimer, wiping her own eyes. "I thought it was so dear of Piers to tell me."

"No doubt," sniffed Miss Whalley. "He is naturally anxious to secure your goodwill. But I wonder very much what point of view the dear Vicar takes of the matter. If I mistake not, he took Mrs. Denys's measure some time ago."

"Did he?" said Mrs. Lorimer vaguely.

Miss Whalley looked annoyed. The Vicar's wife obviously lacked sufficient backbone to quarrel on the subject. She was wont to say that she detested invertebrate women.

"I think the Vicar was not altogether surprised," Mrs. Lorimer went on, in her gentle, conversational way. "You see, Piers had been somewhat assiduous for some time. I myself, however, did not fancy that dear Avery wished to encourage him."

"Pooh!" said Miss Whalley. "It was the chance of her life."

A faint flush rose in Mrs. Lorimer's face. "She is a dear girl," she said. "I don't know what I shall do without her."

"The children are getting older now," said Miss Whalley. "Jeanie ought to be able to take her place to a very great extent."

"My little Jeanie is not strong," murmured Mrs. Lorimer. "She does what she can, but her lessons tire her so. She never has much energy left, poor child. She has not managed to finish her holiday-task yet, and it occupies all her spare time. I told the Vicar that I really did not think she was equal to it. But——" The sentence went into a heavy sigh, and further words failed.

"The Vicar is always very judicious with his children," observed Miss Whalley.

"He does not err on the side of mercy," said his wife pathetically. "And he does not seem to realize that Jeanie lacks the vitality of the others—though how they ever got through their tasks I can't imagine. It must have been dear Avery's doing. She is a genius with children. They all managed it but poor Jeanie. How ever we shall get on without her I cannot think."

"But she was under notice to go, I am told," observed Miss Whalley.

"Yes—yes, I know. But I had hoped that the Vicar might relent. You see, she has been invaluable to us in so many ways. However, I hope when she comes back that we shall see a great deal of her. She is so good to the children, and they adore her."

"I doubt if she will have much time to bestow upon them if the county really do decide to accept her," remarked Miss Whalley. "You forget that she is now Lady Evesham, my dear Mrs. Lorimer, and little likely to remember old friends now that she has attained the summit of her ambition."

"I don't think Avery would forget us if she became a royal princess," said Mrs. Lorimer, with a confidence that Miss Whalley found peculiarly irritating.

"Ah well, we shall see, we shall see!" she said. "I for one shall be extremely surprised if she elects to remain on the same intimate footing. From mother's help at the Vicarage to Lady Evesham of Rodding Abbey is a considerable leap, and she will be scarcely human if it does not turn her head."

But Mrs. Lorimer merely smiled and said no more. She knew how little Avery was drawn by pomp and circumstance, but she would not vaunt her knowledge before one so obviously incapable of understanding. In silence she let the subject pass.

"And where is the honeymoon to be spent?" enquired Miss Whalley, who was there to glean information, and did not mean to go empty away.

But Mrs. Lorimer shook her head. "Even I don't know that. Piers had a whim to go just where they fancied. They will call for letters at certain post-offices on certain days; but he did not want to feel bound to stay at any particular place. Where they are at the present moment or where they will spend to-night, I have not the faintest idea. Nobody knows!"

"How extremely odd!" sniffed Miss Whalley. "But young Evesham always was so ill-balanced and eccentric. Is it true that Doctor Tudor went to the wedding this morning?"

"Quite true," said Mrs. Lorimer. "I thought it was so kind of him. He arrived a little late. Avery did not know

he was there until it was over. But he came forward then and shook hands with them both and wished them happiness. He and young Mr. Guyes, who supported Piers, were the only two present besides the Evesham's family solicitor from Wardenhurst and ourselves. I gave the dear girl away," said Mrs. Lorimer with gentle pride. "And my dear husband conducted the service so impressively."

"I am sure he would," said Miss Whalley. "But I think it was unfortunate that so much secrecy was observed. People are so apt to talk uncharitably. It was really most indiscreet."

Could she have heard the remark which Piers was making at that identical moment to his bride, she would have understood one of the main reasons for his indiscretion.

They were sitting in the deep, deep heart of a wood—an enchanted wood that was heavy with the spring fragrance of the mountain-ash—and Piers, the while he peeled a stick with the deftness of boyhood, observed with much complacence: "Well, we've done that old Whalley chatterbox out of a treat, anyway. Of all the old pariah gossips, that woman is the worst. I never pass her house without seeing her peer over her blind. She always looks at me with a suspicious, disapproving eye. It's rather a shame, you know," he wound up pathetically, "for she has only once in her life found me out, and that was a dozen years ago."

Avery laughed a little. "I don't think she approves of any men except the clergy."

"Oh yes, she clings like a leech to the skirts of the Church," said Piers irreverently. "There are plenty of her sort about—wherever there are parsons, in fact. Of course, it's the parsons' fault. If they didn't encourage 'em they wouldn't be there."

"I don't know that," said Avery, with a smile. "I think you're a little hard on parsons."

"Do you? Well, I don't know many. The Reverend Stephen is enough for me. I fight shy of all the rest."

"My dear, how very narrow of you!" said Avery.

He turned to her boyishly: "Don't tell me you want to be a female curate like the Whalley! I couldn't bear it!"

"I haven't the smallest leaning in that direction," Avery assured him. "But at the same time, one of my greatest

friends is about to enter the Church, and I do want you to meet and like him."

A sudden silence followed her words. Piers resumed the peeling of his stick with minute attention. "I am sure to like him if you do," he remarked, after a moment.

She touched his arm lightly. "Thank you, dear. He is an Australian, and the very greatest-hearted man I ever met. He stood by me in a time of great trouble. I don't know what I should have done without him. I hope he won't feel hurt, but I haven't even told him of my marriage yet."

"We have been married just ten hours," observed Piers, still intent upon his task.

She laughed again. "Yes, but it is ten days since we became engaged, and I owe him a letter into the bargain. He wanted to arrange to meet me in town one day; but he is still too busy to fix a date. He is studying very hard."

"What's his name?" said Piers.

"Crowther—Edmund Crowther. He has been a farmer for years in Queensland." Avery paused a moment. "It was he who broke the news to me of my husband's death," she said in a low voice. "I told you about that, Piers."

"You did," said Piers.

His tone was deliberately repressive, and a little quiver of disappointment went through Avery. She became silent, and the magic of the woods closed softly in upon them. Evening was drawing on, and the long, golden rays of sunshine lay like a benediction over the quiet earth.

The silence between them grew and expanded into something of a barrier. From her seat on a fallen tree Avery gazed out before her. She could not see Piers' face, which was bent above the stick which he had begun to whittle with his knife. He was sitting on the ground at her feet, and only his black head was visible to her.

Suddenly, almost fiercely, he spoke: "I know Edmund Crowther."

Avery's eyes came down to him in astonishment. "You know him!"

"Yes, I know him." He worked furiously at his stick without looking up. His words came in quick jerks, as if for some reason he wanted to get them spoken without delay. "I met him years ago. He did me a good turn—helped me out of a tight corner. A few weeks ago—when

I was at Monte Carlo with my grandfather—I met him again. He told me then that he knew you. Of course it was a rum coincidence. Heaven only knows what makes these things happen. You needn't write to him. I will."

He ceased to speak, and suddenly Avery saw that his hands were trembling—trembling violently as the hands of a man with an ague. She watched them silently, wondering at his agitation, till Piers, becoming aware of her scrutiny, abruptly flung aside the stick upon which he had been expending so much care and leaped to his feet with a laugh that sounded oddly strained to her ear.

"Come along!" he said. "If we sit here talking like Darby and Joan much longer, we shall forget that it's actually our wedding-day."

Avery looked up at him without rising, a queer sense of foreboding at her heart. "Then Edmund Crowther is a friend of yours," she said. "A close friend?"

He stood above her, and she saw a very strange look in his eyes—almost a desperate look.

"Quite a close friend," he said in answer. "But he won't be if you waste any more thought on him for many days to come. I want your thoughts all for myself."

Again he laughed, holding out his hands to her with a gesture that compelled rather than invited. She yielded to his insistence, but with a curious, hurt feeling as of one repulsed. It was as if he had closed a door in her face, not violently or in any sense rudely, yet with such evident intention that she had almost heard the click of the key in the lock.

Hand in hand they went through the enchanted wood; and for ever after, the scent of mountain-ash blossom was to Avery a bitter-sweet memory of that which should have been wholly sweet.

As for Piers, she did not know what was in his mind, though she was aware for a time of a lack of spontaneity behind his tenderness which disquieted her vaguely. She felt as if a shadow had fallen upon him, veiling his inner soul from her sight.

Yet when they sat together in the magic quiet of the spring night in a garden that had surely been planted for lovers the cloud lifted, and she saw him again in all the ardour of his love for her. For he poured it out to her

there in the silence, eagerly, burningly—the worship that had opened to her the gate of that paradise which she had never more hoped to tread.

She put her doubts and fears away from her, she answered to his call. He had awaked the woman's heart in her, and she gave freely, impulsively, not measuring her gift. If she could not offer him a girl's first rapture, she could bestow that which was infinitely greater—the deep, strong love of a woman who had suffered and knew how to endure.

They sat in the dewy garden till in the distant woods the nightingales began their passion-steeped music, and then—because the ecstasy of the night was almost more than she could bear—Avery softly freed herself from her husband's arm and rose.

"Going?" he asked quickly.

He remained seated, holding her hand fast locked in his. She looked down into his upraised face, conscious that her own was in shadow and that she need not try to hide the tears that had risen inexplicably to her eyes.

"Yes, dear," she answered, with an effort at lightness. "You haven't had a smoke since dinner. I am going to leave you to have one now."

But he still held her, as if he could not let her go.

She bent to him after a moment with that sweet impulsiveness of hers that so greatly charmed all who loved her. "What is it, Piers? Don't you want me to go?"

He caught her other hand in his and held them both against his lips.

"Want you to go!" he muttered almost inarticulately; and then suddenly he raised his face again to hers. "Avery—Avery, promise me—swear to me—that, whatever happens, you will never leave me!"

"But, my dearest, haven't I already sworn—only to-day?" she said, surprised by his vehemence and his request. "Of course I shall never leave you. My place is by your side."

"I know! I know!" he said. "But it isn't enough. I want you to promise me personally, so that—I shall always feel—quite sure of you. You see, Avery," his words came with difficulty, his upturned face seemed to beseech her, "I'm not—the sort of impossible, chivalrous knight that Jeanie thinks me. I'm horribly bad. I sometimes think I've got a devil inside me. And I've done things—I've

done things——" His voice shook suddenly; he ended abruptly, with heaving breath. "Before I ever met you, I—wronged you."

He would have let her go then, but it was her hands that held. She stooped lower to him, divinely tender, her love seeming to spread all about him like wings, folding him in.

"My dear," she said softly, "whatever there is of bad in you—remember, the best is mine!"

He caught at the words. "The best—the best! You shall always have that, Avery. But, my darling—you understand—you do understand—how utterly unworthy that best is of you? You must understand that before—before——"

Again his voice went into silence; but she saw his eyes glow suddenly, hotly, in the gloom, and her heart gave a quick, hard throb that caught her breath and held it for the moment suspended, waiting.

He went on after a second, mastering himself with obvious effort. "What I am trying to say is this. "It's easier—or at least not impossible—to forfeit what you've never had. But afterwards—afterwards——" His hands closed tightly upon hers again; his voice sounded half-choked. "Avery, I—couldn't let you go—afterwards," he said.

"But, my own Piers," she whispered, "haven't you said that there is no reason—no earthly reason——"

He broke in upon her almost fiercely. "There is no reason—none whatever—I swear it! You said yourself that the past was nothing to you. You meant it, Avery! Say you meant it!"

"But of course I meant it!" she told him. "Only, Piers, there is no secret chamber in my life that you may not enter. Perhaps some day, dear, when you come to realize that I am older than Jeanie, you will open all your doors to me!"

There was pleading in her voice, notwithstanding its note of banter; but she did not stay to plead. With the whispered words she stooped and softly kissed him. Then ere he could detain her longer she gently released herself and was gone.

He saw her light figure flit ghost-like across the dim stretch of grass and vanish into the shadows. And he started to his feet as if he would follow or call her back. But he did

neither. He only stood swaying on his feet with a face of straining impotence—as of a prisoner wrestling vainly with his iron bars—until she had gone wholly from his sight. And then with a stifled groan he dropped down again into his chair and covered his face.

He had paid a heavy price to enter the garden of his desire; but already he had begun to realize that the fruit he gathered there was Dead Sea Fruit.

CHAPTER II

THAT WHICH IS HOLY

NO bells had rung at the young squire's wedding. It had been conducted with a privacy which Miss Whalley described as "almost indecent." But there was no privacy about his return, and Miss Whalley was shocked afresh at the brazen heartlessness of it after his recent bereavement. For Sir Piers and his wife motored home at the end of July through a village decked with flags and bunting and under a triumphal arch that made Piers' little two-seater seem absurdly insignificant; while the bells in the church-tower clanged the noisiest welcome they could compass, and Gracie—home for the holidays—mustered the school-children to cheer their hardest as the happy couple passed the school-house gate.

Avery would fain have stopped to greet the child, but Piers would not be persuaded.

"No! No! To-morrow!" he said. "The honeymoon isn't over till after to-night."

So they waved and were gone, at a speed which made Miss Whalley wonder what the local police could be about.

Once past the lodge-gates and Marshall's half-grudging, half-pleased smile of welcome, the speed was doubled. Piers went like the wind, till Avery breathlessly cried to him to stop.

"You'll kill us both before we get there!" she protested.

In answer to which Piers moderated the pace, remarking as he did so, "But you would like to die by my side—what?"

Victor was on the steps to receive them, Victor dancing

with impatience and delight. For his young master's prolonged honeymoon had represented ten weeks of desolation to him.

Old David was also present, inconspicuous and dignified, waiting to pour out tea for the travellers.

And Cæsar, the Dalmatian, who had mourned with Victor for his absent deity, now leaped upon him in one great rush of ecstatic welcome that nearly bore him backwards.

It was a riotous home-coming, for Piers was in boisterous spirits. They had travelled far that day, but he was in a mood of such restless energy that he seemed incapable of feeling fatigue.

Avery on her part was thoroughly weary, but she would not tell him so, and they spent the whole evening in wandering about house and gardens, discussing the advisability of various alterations and improvements. In the end Piers awoke suddenly to the fact that she was looking utterly exhausted, and with swift compunction piloted her to her room.

"What a fool I am!" he declared. "You must be dead beat. Why didn't you say you wanted to rest?"

"I didn't, dear," she answered simply. "I wanted to be with you."

He caught her hand to his lips. "You are happy with me, then?"

She uttered a little laugh that said more than words. "My own boy, you give me all that the most exacting woman could possibly desire and then ask me that!"

He laughed too, his arm close about her. "I would give you the world if I had it. Avery, I hate to think we've come home—that the honeymoon is over—and the old beastly burdens waiting to be shouldered." He laid his forehead against her neck with a gesture that made her fancy he did not wish her to see his face for the moment. "P'raps I'm a heartless brute, but I never missed the old chap all the time I was away," he whispered. "It's like being dragged under the scourge again—just when the old scars were beginning to heal—to come back to this empty barrack."

She slid a quick arm round his neck, all the woman's heart in her responding to the cry from his.

"The place is full of him," Piers went on: "I meet him at every corner. I see him in his old place on the settle in

the hall, where he used to wait for me, and—and row me every night for being late." He gave a broken laugh. "Avery, if it weren't for you, I—I believe I should shoot myself."

"Come and sit down!" said Avery gently. She drew him to a couch, and they sat down locked together.

During all the ten weeks of their absence he had scarcely even mentioned his grandfather. He had been gay and inconsequent, or fiercely passionate in his devotion to her. But of his loss he had never spoken, and vaguely she had known that he had shut it out of his life with that other grim shadow that dwelt behind the locked door she might not open. She had not deemed him heartless, but she had regretted that deliberate shirking of his grief. She had known that sooner or later he would have to endure the scourging of which he spoke and that it would not grow the lighter with postponement.

And now as she held him against her heart, she was in a sense relieved that it had come at last, thankful to be there with him while he stripped himself of all subterfuge and faced his sorrow.

He could not speak much as he sat there clasped in her arms. One or two attempts he made, and then broke down against her breast. But no words were needed. Her arms were all he desired for consolation, and if they waked in him the old wild remorse, he stifled it ere it could take full possession.

Finally, when the first bitterness had passed, they sat and talked together, and he found relief in telling her of the life he had lived in close companionship with the old man.

"We quarrelled a dozen times," he said. "But somehow we could neither of us keep it up. I don't know why. We were violent enough at times. There's an Evesham devil somewhere in our ancestry, and he has a trick of cropping up still in moments of excitement. You've met him more than once. He's a formidable monster—what?"

"I am not afraid of him," said Avery, with her cheek against his black head.

He gave a shaky laugh. "You'd fling a bucket of water over Satan himself! I love you for not being afraid. But I don't know how you manage it, and that's a fact. Darling,

I'm a selfish brute to wear you out like this. Send me away when you can't stand any more of me!"

"Would you go?" she said, softly stroking his cheek.

He caught her hand again and kissed it hotly, devouringly, in answer. "But I mustn't wear you out," he said a moment later, with an odd wistfulness. "You mustn't let me, Avery."

She drew her hand gently away from the clinging of his lips. "No, I won't let you," she said, in a tone he did not understand.

He clasped her to him. "It's because I worship you so," he whispered passionately. "There is no one else in the world but you. I adore you! I adore you!"

She closed her eyes from the fiery worship that looked forth from his. "Piers," she said, "wait, dear, wait!"

"Why should I wait?" he demanded almost fiercely.

"Because I ask you. Because—just now—to be loved like that is more than I can bear. "Will you—can you—kiss me only once, and go?"

He held her in his arms. He gazed long and burningly upon her. In the end he stooped and with reverence he kissed her. "I am going, Avery," he said.

She opened her eyes to him. "God bless you, my own Piers!" she murmured softly, and laid her cheek for a moment against his sleeve ere he took his arm away.

As for Piers, he went from her as if he feared to trespass, and her heart smote her a little as she watched him go. But she would not call him back. She went instead to one of the great bay windows and leaned against the framework, gazing out. He was very good to her in all things, but there were times when she felt solitude to be an absolute necessity. His vitality, his fevered desire for her, wore upon her nerves. His attitude towards her was not wholly natural. It held something of a menace to her peace which disquieted her vaguely. She had a feeling that though she knew herself to be all he wanted in the world, yet she did not succeed in fully satisfying him. He seemed to be perpetually craving for something further, as though somewhere deep within him there burned a fiery thirst that nothing could ever slake. Her lightest touch seemed to awake it, and there were moments when his unfettered passion made her afraid.

Not for worlds would she have had him know it. Her love for him was too deep to let her shrink; and she knew that only by that love did she maintain her ascendancy, appealing to his higher nature as only true love can appeal. But the perpetual strain of it told upon her, and that night she felt tired in body and soul.

The great bedroom behind her with its dark hangings and oak furniture seemed dreary and unhome-like. She viewed the ancient and immense four-poster with misgiving, and wondered if Queen Elizabeth had ever slept in it.

After a time she investigated Piers' room beyond, and found it less imposing, though curiously stiff and wholly lacking in ordinary cheery comfort. Later she discovered the reason for this grim severity of arrangement. No woman's touch had softened it for close upon half a century.

She went back to her own room and dressed. Piers had wanted her to have a maid, but she had refused until other changes should be made in the establishment. There seemed so much to alter that she felt bewildered. A household of elderly men-servants presented a problem with which she knew she would find it difficult to deal.

She put the matter gently before Piers that night, but he dismissed it as trivial.

"You can't turn 'em off of course," he said. "But you can have a dozen women to adjust the balance if you want 'em."

Avery did not, but she was too tired to argue the point. She let the subject slide.

They dined together in the oak-panelled dining-room where Piers had so often sat with his grandfather. The table seemed to stretch away illimitably into shadows, and Avery felt like a Lilliputian. From the wall directly facing her the last Lady Evesham smiled upon her—her baffling, mirthless smile that seemed to cover naught but heartache. She found herself looking up again and again to meet those eyes of mocking comprehension; and the memory of what Lennox Tudor had once told her recurred to her. This was Piers' Italian grandmother, whose patrician beauty had descended to him through her scapegrace son.

"Are you looking at that woman with the smile?" said Piers abruptly.

She turned to him. "You are so like her, Piers. But I

wouldn't like you to have a smile like that. There is something tragic behind it."

"We are a tragic family," said Piers sombrely. "As for her, she ruined her own life and my grandfather's too. She might have been happy enough with him if she had tried."

"Oh, Piers, I wonder!" Avery said, with a feeling that that smile revealed more to her than to him.

"I say she might," Piers reiterated, with a touch of impatience. "He thought the world of her, just as—just as"—he smiled at her suddenly—"I do of you. He never knew that she wasn't satisfied until one fine day she left him. She married again—afterwards, and then died. He never got over it."

But still Avery had a vagrant feeling of pity for the woman who had been Sir Beverley's bride. "I expect they never really understood each other," she said.

Piers' dark eyes gleamed. "Do you know what I would have done if I had been in his place?" he said. "I would have gone after her and brought her back—even if I'd killed her afterwards."

His voice vibrated on a deep note of savagery. He poured out a glass of wine with a hand that shook.

Avery said nothing, but through the silence she was conscious of the hard throbbing of her heart. There was something implacable, something almost cruel, about Piers at that moment. She felt as if he had bruised her without knowing it.

And then in his sudden, bewildering way he left his chair and came to her, stooped boyishly over her. "My darling, you're so awfully pale to-night. Have some wine—to please me!"

She leaned her head back against his shoulder and closed her eyes. "I am a little tired, dear; but I don't want any wine. I shall be all right in the morning."

He laid his cheek against her forehead. "I want you to drink a toast with me. Won't you?"

"We won't drink to each other," she protested, faintly smiling. "It's too like drinking to ourselves."

"That's the sweetest thing you've ever said to me," he declared. "But we won't toast ourselves. We'll drink to the future, Avery, and"—he lowered his voice—"and all it contains. What?"

Her eyes opened quickly, but she did not move. "Why do you say that?"

"What?" he said again very softly.

She was silent.

He reached a hand for his own glass. "Drink with me, sweetheart!" he said persuasively.

She suffered him to put it to her lips and drank submissively. But in a moment she put up a restraining hand. "You finish it!" she said, and pushed it gently towards him.

He took it and held it high. The light gleamed crimson in the wine; it glowed like liquid fire. A moment he held it so, then without a word he carried it to his lips and drained it.

A second later there came the sound of splintering glass, and Avery, turning in her chair, discovered that he had flung it over his shoulder.

She gazed at him in amazement, astonished by his action. "Piers!"

But something in his face checked her. "No one will ever drink out of that glass again," he said. "Are you ready? Shall we go in the garden for a breath of air?"

She went with him, but on the terrace outside he stopped impulsively. "Avery darling, I don't mean to be a selfish beast; but I've got to prowl for a bit. Would you rather go to bed?"

His arm was round her; she leaned against him half laughing. "Do you know, dear, that bedroom frightens me with its magnificence! Don't prowl too long!"

He bent to her swiftly. "Avery! Do you want me?"

"Just to scare away the bogies," she made answer, with a lightness that scarcely veiled a deeper feeling. "And when you've done that—quite thoroughly—perhaps——" She stopped.

"Perhaps——" whispered Piers.

"Perhaps I'll tell you a secret," she said, still lightly. "By the way, dear, I found a letter from Mr. Crowther waiting for me. I put it in your room for you to read. He writes so kindly. Wouldn't you like him to be our first visitor?"

There was a moment's silence before Piers made answer.

"To be sure," he said then. "We mustn't forget Crowther. You wrote and told him everything, I suppose?"

"Yes, everything. He seems very fond of you, Piers. But you must read his letter. It concerns you quite as much as it does me. There! I am going. Good-bye! Come up soon!"

She patted his shoulder and turned away. Somehow it had not been easy to speak of Crowther. She had known that in doing so she had introduced an unwelcome subject. But Crowther was too great a friend to ignore. She felt that she had treated him somewhat casually already; for it was only the previous week that she had written to tell him of her marriage.

Crowther was in town, studying hard for an examination, and she felt convinced that he would be willing to pay them a visit. She also knew that for some reason Piers was reluctant to ask him, but she felt that that fact ought not to influence her. For she owed a debt of gratitude to Crowther which she could never forget.

But all thought of Crowther faded from her mind when she found herself once more in that eerie, tapestry-hung bedroom. The place had been lighted with candles, but they only seemed to emphasize the gloom. She wondered how often the last Lady Evesham—the warm-blooded, passionate Italian woman with her love of the sun and all things beautiful—had stood as she stood now and shuddered at the dreary splendour of her surroundings. How homesick she must have been, Avery thought to herself, as she undressed in the flickering candlelight! How her soul must have yearned for the glittering Southern life she had left!

She thought of Sir Beverley. He must have been very like Piers in his youth, less fierce, less intense, but in many ways practically the same, giving much and demanding even more, restless and exacting, but withal so lovable, so hard to resist, so infinitely dear. All her love for Piers throbbed suddenly up to the surface. How good he was to her! What would life be without him? She reproached herself for ingratitude and discontent. Life was a beautiful thing if only she would have it so.

She knelt down at length by the deep cushioned window-seat and began to pray. The night was dim and quiet, and as she prayed she gradually forgot the shadows behind her and seemed to lose herself in the immensity of its peace.

She realized as never before that by her love she must prevail. It was the one weapon, unfailing and invincible, that alone would serve her, when she could rely upon no other. She knew that he had felt its influence, that there were times when he did instinctive reverence to it, as to that which is holy. She knew moreover that there was that within him that answered to it as it were involuntarily—a fiery essence in which his passion had no part, which dwelt deep down in his turbulent heart—a germ of greatness which she knew might blossom into Love Immortal.

He was young, he was young. He wanted life, all he could get of it. And he left the higher things because as yet he was undeveloped. He had not felt that hunger of the spirit which only that which is spiritual can satisfy. It would come. She was sure it would come. She was watching for it day by day. His wings were still untried. He did not want to soar. But by and by the heights would begin to draw him. And then—then they would soar together. But till that day dawned, her love must be the guardian of them both.

There came a slight sound in the room behind her. She turned swiftly. "Piers!"

He was close to her. As she started to her feet his arms enclosed her. He looked down into her eyes, holding her fast pressed to him.

"I didn't mean to disturb you," he said. "But—when I saw you were praying—I had to come in. I wanted so awfully to know—if you would get an answer."

"But, Piers!" she protested.

He kissed her lips. "Don't be angry, Avery! I'm not scoffing. I don't know enough about God to scoff at Him. Tell me! Do you ever get an answer, or are you content to go jogging on like the rest of the world without?"

She made an effort to free herself. "Do you know, Piers, I can't talk to you about—holy things—when you are holding me like this."

He looked stubborn. "I don't know what you mean by holy things. I'm not a believer. At least I don't believe in prayer. I can get all I want without it."

"I wonder!" Avery said.

She was still trying to disengage herself, but as he held her with evident determination she desisted.

There followed a silence during which her grey eyes met his black ones steadily, fearlessly, resolutely. Then in a whisper Piers spoke, his lips still close to hers. "Tell me, what you were praying for, sweetheart!"

She smiled a little. "No, dear, not now! It's nothing that's in your power to give me. Shall we sit on the window-seat and talk?"

But Piers was loth to let her go from his arms. He knelt beside her as she sat, still holding her.

She put her arm round his neck. "Do you remember your Star of Hope?" she asked him softly.

"I remember," said Piers, but he did not turn his eyes to the night sky; they still dwelt upon her.

Avery's face was toward the window. The drapery fell loosely away from her throat. He stooped forward suddenly and pressed his hot lips upon her soft white flesh.

A little tremor went through her at his touch; she kept her face turned from him.

"Have you really got all you want?" she asked after a moment. "Is there nothing at all left to hope for?"

"Didn't we drink to the future only to-night?" he said.

His arms were drawing her, but still she kept her face turned away. "Did you mean anything by that?" she asked. "Were you—were you thinking of anything special?"

He did not at once answer her. He waited till with an odd reluctance she turned her face towards him. Then: "I was thinking of you," he said.

Her heart gave a quick throb. "Of me?" she questioned below her breath.

"Of you," he said again. "For myself, I have got all I can ever hope for. But you—you would be awfully happy wouldn't you, if——"

"If——" murmured Avery.

He stooped again to kiss her white bosom. "And it would be a bond between us," he said, as if continuing some remark he had not uttered.

She turned more fully to him. "Do we need that?" she said.

"We might—some day," he answered, in a tone that somehow made it impossible for her to protest. "Anyhow,

my darling, I knew—I guessed. And I'm awfully glad —for your sake."

She bent towards him. "Not for your own?" she whispered pleadingly.

He laid his head suddenly down upon her knees with a sound that was almost a groan.

"Piers!" she said in distress.

He was silent for a space, then slowly raised himself. She had a sense of shock at sight of his face. It looked haggard and grey, as if a withering hand had touched him and shorn away his youth.

"Avery—oh, Avery," he said, "I wish I were a better man!"

It was a cry wrung from his soul—the hungry cry which she had longed to hear, and it sent a great joy through her, even though it wrung her own soul also.

She bent to him swiftly. "Dearest, we all feel that sometimes. And I think it is the Hand of God upon us, opening our eyes."

He did not answer or make any response to her words. Only as he clasped her to him, she heard him sigh. And she knew that, strive as he might to silence that soul-craving with earthly things, it would beat on unsatisfied through all. She came nearer to understanding him that night than ever before.

CHAPTER III

THE FIRST GUEST

"I AM greatly honoured to be your first guest," said Crowther.

"The honour is ours to get you," Avery declared.

She sat on the terrace whither she had conducted him, and smiled at him across the tea-table with eyes of shining friendship.

Crowther smiled back, thinking to himself how pleasant a picture she made. She was dressed in white, and her face was flushed and happy, even girlish in its animation. There was a ring of laughter in her voice when she talked that was very good to hear. She had herself just brought him from the station in Piers' little two-seater, and her

obvious pleasure at meeting him still hung about her, making her very fair to see.

"Piers is so busy just now," she told him. "He sent all sorts of messages. He had to go over to Wardenhurst to see Colonel Rose. The M.P. for this division retired at the end of the Session, and Piers is to stand for the constituency. They talk of having the election in October."

"Will he get in?" asked Crowther, still watching her with friendly appreciation in his eyes.

"Oh, I don't know. I expect so. He gets most things that he sets his heart on. His grandfather—you knew Sir Beverley?—was so anxious that he should enter Parliament."

"Yes, I knew Sir Beverley," said Crowther. "He thought the world of Piers."

"And Piers of him," said Avery.

"Ah! Was it a great blow to him when the old man died?"

"A very great blow," she answered soberly. "That was the main reason for our marrying so suddenly. The poor boy was so lonely I couldn't bear to think of him all by himself in this great house."

"He was very lucky to get you," said Crowther gravely.

She smiled. "I was lucky too. Don't you think so? I never pictured such a home as this for myself in my wildest dreams."

A great magnolia climbed the house behind her with creamy flowers that shed their lemon fragrance all about them. Crowther compared her in his own mind to the wonderful blossoms. She was so sweet, so pure, yet also in a fashion, so splendid.

"I think it is a very suitable setting for you, Lady Evesham," he said.

She made a quick, impulsive movement towards him. "Do call me Avery!" she said.

"Thank you," he answered, with a smile. "It certainly seems more natural. How long have you been in this home of yours, may I ask?"

"Only a fortnight," she said, laughing. "Our honeymoon took ten weeks. Piers wanted to make it ten years; but the harvest was coming on, and I knew he ought to come back and see what was happening. And then Mr. Ferrars resigned his seat, and it became imperative. But

isn't it a beautiful place?" she ended. "I felt overwhelmed by the magnificence of it at first, but I am getting used to it now."

"A glorious place," agreed Crowther. "Piers must be very proud of it. Have you begun to have many visitors yet?"

She shook her head. "No, not many. Nearly all the big people have gone to Scotland. Piers says they will come later, but I shall not mind them so much then. I shall feel less like an interloper by that time."

"I don't know why you should feel like that," said Crowther.

Avery smiled. "Well, all the little people think that I set out to catch Piers for his money and his title."

"Does what the little people think have any weight with you?" asked Crowther.

She flushed faintly under the kindly directness of his gaze. "Not really, I suppose. But one can't quite shake off the feeling of it. There is the Vicar, for instance. He has never liked me. He congratulates me almost every time we meet."

"Evidently a cad," commented Crowther in his quiet way.

Avery laughed a little. She had always liked this man's plain speech. "He is not the only one," she said.

"But you have friends—real friends—also?" he questioned.

"Oh yes, indeed! The Vicarage children and their mother are the greatest friends I have." Avery spoke with warmth. "The children are having tea down in one of the cornfields now. We must go and see them presently. You are fond of children, I know."

"I sort of love them," said Crowther, with his slow, kind smile. "Ah, Piers, my lad, are you trying to steal a march on us? Did you think I didn't know?"

He spoke without raising his voice. Avery turned sharply to see her husband standing on the steps of a room above them. One glimpse she had of Piers' face ere he descended and joined them, and an odd feeling of dismay smote her. For that one fleeting moment there seemed to be something of the cornered beast in his aspect.

But as he came straight down to Crowther and wrung his

hand, his dark face was smiling a welcome. He was in riding-dress, and looked very handsome and young.

"How did you know it was I? Awfully pleased to see you! Sorry I couldn't get back sooner. I've been riding liked the devil. Avery explained, did she?" He threw himself into a chair, and tossed an envelope into her lap. "An invitation to Ina Rose's wedding on the twenty-third. That's the week after next. They are sorry they can't manage to call before, hope you'll understand and go. I said you should do both."

"Thank you, Piers." Avery laid the envelope aside unopened. She did not feel that he was being very cordial to Crowther. "I am not sure that I shall go."

"Oh yes, you will," he rejoined quickly. "You must. It's an order, see?" His dark eyes laughed at her, but there was more than a tinge of imperiousness in his manner. "Well, Crowther, how are you? Getting ready to scatter the Philistines? Don't give me milk, Avery! You know I hate it at this time of day."

She looked at him in surprise. He had never used that impatient tone to her before. "I didn't know," she observed simply, as she handed him his cup.

"Well, you know now," he rejoined with an irritable frown. "Hurry up, Crowther! I want you to come and see the crops."

Avery was literally amazed by his manner. He had never been so frankly and unjustifiably rude to her before. She came to the conclusion that something had happened at the Roses' to annoy him; but that he should visit his annoyance upon her was a wholly new experience.

He drank his tea, talking hard to Crowther the while, and finally sprang to his feet as if in a ferment to be gone.

"Won't Lady Evesham come too?" asked Crowther, as he rose.

Avery rose also. "Yes, I have promised the children to join them in the cornfield," she said.

Piers said nothing; but she had a very distinct impression that he would have preferred her to remain behind. The wonder crossed her mind if he were jealous because he could no longer have her exclusively to himself.

They walked down through the park to the farm. It was a splendid August evening. The reaping was still in pro-

grass, and the whirr of the machine rose slumbrous through the stillness. But of the Vicarage children there was at first no sign.

Avery searched for them in surprise. She had sent a picnic-basket down to the farm earlier in the afternoon, and she had expected to find them enjoying the contents thereof in a shady corner. But for a time she searched in vain.

"They must have gone home," said Piers.

But she did not believe they would have left without seeing her, and she went to the farm to make inquiries.

Here she heard that the picnic-party had taken place and that the basket had been brought back by one of the men, but for some reason the children had evidently gone home early, for they had not been seen since.

Avery wanted to run to the Vicarage and ascertain if all were well, but Piers vetoed this.

"It's too hot," he said. "And you'll only come in for some row with the Reverend Stephen. I won't have you go, Avery. Stay with us!"

His tone was peremptory, and Avery realized that his assumption of authority was intentional. A rebellious spirit awoke within her, but she checked it. Something had gone wrong, she was sure. He would tell her presently what it was.

She yielded therefore to his desire and remained with them. They spent a considerable time in the neighbourhood of the farm, in all of which Crowther took a keen interest. Avery tried to be interested too, but Piers' behaviour troubled and perplexed her. He seemed to be all on edge, and more than once his manner to Crowther also verged upon abruptness.

They were leaving the farm to turn homeward when there came to Avery the sound of flying feet along the lane outside. She went to the gate, and beheld Gracie, her face crimson with heat, racing towards her.

Avery moved to meet her, surprised by her sudden appearance. She was still more surprised when Gracie reached her, flung tempestuous arms about her, and broke into stormy crying on her breast.

"My dear! My dear! What has happened?" Avery asked in distress.

But Gracie was for the moment quite beyond speech. She hung upon Avery, crying as if her heart would break.

Piers came swiftly down the path. "Why, Pixie, what's the matter?" he said.

He put his hand on her shoulder, drawing her gently to lean against himself, for in her paroxysm of weeping she had thrown herself upon Avery with childish unrestraint.

"Who's been bullying you, Pixie?" he said.

"Nobody! Nobody!" sobbed Gracie. She transferred herself to his arms almost mechanically, so overwhelming was her woe. "Oh, it's dreadful! It's dreadful!" she cried.

He patted her soothingly, his cheek against her fair hair. "Well, what is it, kiddie? Let's hear! One of the youngsters in trouble—what? Not Jeanie, I say?"

"No, no, no! It's—Mike." The name came out with a great burst of tears.

"Mike!" Piers looked at Avery, mystified for the moment. "Ah, to be sure! The dog! Well, what's happened to him? He isn't dead—what?"

"He is! He is!" sobbed Gracie. "He—he has been killed—by—by his own chain!"

"What!" said Piers again.

Gaspingly she told him the tragic tale. "Father always will have him kept on the chain, and—and——"

"An infernally cruel thing to do!" broke indignantly from Piers.

"Yes, we—we all said so. And we tried to give him little outings sometimes to—to make up. But to-day—somehow—we forgot him, and—and he must have seen us go, and jumped the wall after us. Pat and I went back afterwards to fetch him, and found him—found him—oh, Piers!" She cried out in sudden agony and said no more.

"Choked?" said Piers. "Choked with his own chain, poor devil!" He looked up again at Avery with something unfathomable in his eyes. "Oh, don't cry so, child!" he said. "A chained creature is happier dead—a thousand times happier!"

He spoke passionately, so passionately that Gracie's wild grief was stayed. She lifted her face, all streaming with tears. "Do you think so really?"

"Of course I think so," he said. "Life on a chain is

misery unspeakable. No one with any heart could condemn a dog to that! It's the refinement of cruelty. Don't wish the poor beast back again! Be thankful he's gone!"

The vehemence of his speech was such that it carried conviction even to Gracie's torn heart. She looked up at him with something of wonder and of awe. "If only—he hadn't suffered so!" she whispered.

He put his hand on her forehead and smoothed back the clustering hair. "You poor kid!" he said pityingly. "You've suffered much more than he did at the end. But it's over. Don't fret! Don't fret!"

Gracie lifted trembling lips to be kissed. He was drying her eyes with his own handkerchief as tenderly as any woman. He stooped and kissed her. "Look here! I'll walk home with you," he said. "Avery, you go back with Crowther! I shan't be late."

Avery turned at once. The sight of Piers soothing the little girl's distress had comforted her subtly. She felt that his mood had softened.

"Won't you go too?" said Crowther, as she joined him. "Please don't stay on my account! I am used to being alone, and I can find my own way back."

"Oh no!" she said. "I had better come with you. I shan't be wanted now."

They started to walk back among the shocks of corn; but they had not gone many yards when Gracie came running after them, reached them, flung her arms about Avery.

"Good-bye, darling Avery!" she said.

Avery held her close. She was sobbing still, but the first wild anguish of her grief was past.

"Good-bye, darling!" Avery whispered, after a moment.

Gracie's arms tightened. "You think like Piers does?" she murmured. "You think poor Mikey is happier now?"

Avery paused an instant. The memory of Piers' look as he had uttered the words: "Choked with his own chain, poor devil!" seemed to grip her heart. Then: "Yes, dearie," she said softly. "I think as Piers does. I am glad—for poor Mikey's sake—that his troubles are over."

"Then I'll try and be glad too," sobbed poor Gracie. "But it's very, very difficult. Pat and I loved him so, and he—he loved us."

"My dear, that love won't die," Avery said gently.

"The gift immortal," said Crowther. "The only thing that counts."

She looked round at him quickly, but his eyes were gazing straight into the sunset—steadfast eyes that saw to the very heart of things.

"And Life in Death," he added quietly.

CHAPTER IV

THE PRISONER IN THE DUNGEON

AVERY was already dressed when she heard Piers enter his room and say a word to Victor. She stood by her window waiting. It was growing late, but she felt sure he would come to her.

She heard Victor bustling about in his resilient fashion, and again Piers' voice, somewhat curt and peremptory, reached her through the closed door. He was evidently dressing at full speed. She was conscious of a sense of disappointment, though she kept it at bay, reminding herself that they must not keep their guest waiting.

But presently, close upon the dinner-hour, she went herself to the door of her husband's room and knocked.

His voice answered her immediately, but it still held that unwonted quality of irritation in it. "Oh, Avery, I can't let you in. I'm sorry. Victor's here."

Something—a small, indignant spirit—sprang up within her in response. "Send Victor away!" she said. "I want to come in."

"I shall be late if I do," he made answer. "I'm horribly late as it is."

But for once Avery's habitual docility was in abeyance. "Send Victor away!" she reiterated.

She heard Piers utter an impatient word, and then in a moment or two he raised his voice again. "Come in, then! What is it?"

She opened the door with an odd, unaccustomed feeling of trepidation.

He was standing in his shirt-sleeves brushing his hair vigorously at the table. His back was towards her, but the glass reflected his face, and she saw that his brows were

drawn into a single hard black line. His lips were tightly compressed. He looked undeniably formidable.

"Don't you want me, Piers?" she asked, pausing in the doorway.

His eyes flashed up to hers in the glass, glowing with a smouldering fire, oddly fitful, oddly persistent. "Come in!" he said, without turning. "What is it?"

She went forward to him. "Did you go to the Vicarage?" she asked. "Are they in great trouble?"

She thought she saw relief in his face at her words. "Oh yes," he said. "Mrs. Lorimer crying as usual, Jeanie trying to comfort her. I did my best to hearten them up; but you know what they are. I say, sit down!"

"No, I am going," she answered gently. "Did you get on all right this afternoon?"

"Oh yes," he said again. "By the way, we must get a wedding-present for Ina Rose and another for Guyes. You'll come to the wedding, Avery?"

"If you wish it, dear," she said quietly.

He threw down his brushes and turned fully to her. "Avery darling, I'm sorry I was bearish this afternoon. You won't punish me for it?"

"Punish you, my own Piers!" she said.

"Because I can't stand it," he said recklessly. "There are certain forms of torture that drive a man crazy. Bear with me—all you can!"

His quick pleading touched her, went straight to her heart. She put her hands on his shoulders, lifting her face for his kiss. "It's all right, dear," she said.

"Is it?" he said. "Is it?" He took her face between his hands, gazing down at her with eyes of passionate craving. "Say you love me!" he urged suddenly. "Say it!"

Her heart sank within her. She made a movement as if to withdraw herself; but he caught her fiercely to him, his hot lips sought and held her own. She felt as if a flame encompassed her, scorching her, consuming her.

"Say you love me!" he whispered again between those fiery kisses. "Avery, I must have your soul as well. Do more than bear with me! Want me—want me!"

There was more than passion in the words. They came to her like a cry of torment. She braced herself to meet his need, realising it to be greater than she knew.

"Piers! Piers!" she said. "I am altogether yours. I love you. Don't you know it?"

He drew a deep, quivering breath. "Yes—yes, I do know it," he said. "But—but—Avery, I would go through hell for you. You are my religion, my life, my all. I am not that to you. If—if I were dragged down, you wouldn't follow me in."

His intensity shocked her, but she would not have him know it. She sought to calm his agitation, though she possessed no key thereto. "My dear," she said, "you are talking wildly. You don't know what you are to me, and I can't even begin to tell you. But surely—by now—you can take me on trust."

He made a curious sound that was half-laugh, half-groan. "You don't know yourself, Avery," he said.

"But you don't doubt my love, Piers," she protested very earnestly. "You know that it would never fail you."

"Your love is like the moonlight, Avery," he answered. "It is all whiteness and purity. But mine—mine is red like the fire that is under the earth. And though sometimes it scorches you, it never quite reaches you. You stoop to me, but you can't lift me. You are too far above. And the moonlight doesn't always reach to the prisoner in the dungeon either."

"All the same, dear, don't be afraid that it will ever fail you!" she said.

He kissed her again, hotly, lingeringly, and let her go. "Perhaps I shall remind you of that one day," he said.

All through dinner his spirits were recklessly high. He talked incessantly, playing the host with a brilliant ease that betrayed no sign of strain. He did not seem to have a care in the world, and Avery marvelled at his versatility.

She herself felt weary and strangely sick at heart. Those few words of his had been a bitter revelation to her. She knew now what was wanting between them. He desired passion from her rather than love. He had no use for spiritual things. And she—she knew that she shrank inwardly whenever she encountered that fierce, untamed desire of his. It fettered her spirit, it hung upon her like an overpowering weight. She could not satisfy his wild, Southern nature. He crushed her love with the very fierceness of his possession and ever cried to her for more He seemed insatiable. Even

though she gave him all she had, he still hungered, still strove feverishly to possess himself of something further.

She felt worn out, body and soul, and she could not hide it. She was unspeakably glad when at length the meal was over and she was able to leave the table.

Crowther opened the door for her, looking at her with eyes of kindly criticism.

"You look tired," he said. "I hope you don't sit up late."

She smiled at him. "Oh no! We will make Piers play to us presently, and then I will say good night."

"Then we mustn't keep you waiting long," he said. "So Piers is a musician, is he? I didn't know."

"You had better go to bed, Avery; it's late," said Piers abruptly. "I can't play to-night. The spirit doesn't move me." He rose from the table with a careless laugh. "Say good night to her, Crowther, and let her go! We will smoke in the garden."

There was finality in his tone, its lightness notwithstanding. Again there came to Avery the impulse to rebel, and again instinctively she caught it back. She held out her hand to Crowther.

"I am dismissed, then," she said. "Good night!"

His smile answered hers. He looked regretful, but very kindly. "I am glad to see Piers takes care of you," he said.

She laughed a little drearily as she went away, making no other response.

Crowther turned back to the table with its shaded candles and gleaming wine. He saw that Piers' glass was practically untouched.

Piers himself was searching a cabinet for cigars. He found what he sought, and turned round with the box in his hand.

"I don't know what you generally smoke," he said. "Will you try one of these? It's a hot night. We may as well have coffee in the garden."

He seemed possessed with a spirit of restlessness, just as he had been on that night at the Casino in the spring. Crowther, massive and self-contained, observed him silently.

They went out on to the terrace, and drank their coffee in the dewy stillness. But even there Piers could not sit still.

He prowled to and fro eternally, till Crowther set down his cup and joined him, pushing a quiet hand through his arm.

"It's a lovely place you've got here, sonny," he said; "a regular garden of Paradise. I almost envy you."

"Oh, you needn't do that. There's a serpent in every Eden," said Piers, with a mirthless laugh.

He did not seek to keep Crowther at arm's length, but neither did he seem inclined for any closer intimacy. His attitude neither invited nor repelled confidence. Yet Crowther knew intuitively that his very indifference was in itself a barrier that might well prove insurmountable.

He walked in silence while Piers talked intermittently of various impersonal matters, drifting at length into silence himself.

In the western wing of the house a light burned at an upper window, and Crowther, still quietly observant, noted how at each turn Piers' eyes went to that light as though drawn by some magnetic force.

Gently at length he spoke: "She doesn't look altogether robust, sonny."

Piers started sharply as if something had pricked him. "What? Avery do you mean? No, she isn't over and above strong—just now."

He uttered the last two words as if reluctantly, yet as if some measure of pride impelled him.

Crowther's hand pressed his arm, in mute sympathy. "You are right to take care of her," he said simply. "And Piers, my lad, I want to tell you how glad I was to know that you were able to win her after all. I somehow felt you would."

It was his first attempt to pass that intangible barrier, and it failed. Piers disregarded the words as if they had not reached him.

"I don't know if I shall let her stay here through the winter," he said. "I am not sure that the place suits her. It's damp, you know; good hunting and so on, but a bit depressing in bad weather. Besides I'd rather have her under a town doctor. The new heir arrives in March," he said, with a slight laugh that struck Crowther as unconsciously pathetic.

"I'm very pleased to hear it, sonny," said Crowther.

"May he be the first of many! What does Avery think about it? I'll warrant she's pleased?"

"Oh yes, she's pleased enough."

"And you, lad?"

"Oh yes, I'm pleased too," said Piers, but his tone lacked complete satisfaction, and he added after a moment, "I'd rather have had her to myself a bit longer. I'm a selfish brute, you know, Crowther. I want all I can get—and even that's hardly enough to keep me from starvation."

There was a note of banter in his voice, but there was something else as well that touched Crowther's kindly heart.

"I don't think Avery is the sort of woman to sacrifice her husband to her children," he said. "You will always come first, sonny—if I know her."

"I couldn't endure anything else," said Piers, with sudden fire. "She is the mainspring of my life."

"And you of hers," said Crowther.

Piers stopped dead in his walk and faced him. "No—no, I'm not!" he said, speaking quickly, unrestrainedly. "I'm a good deal to her, but I'm not that. She gives, but she never offers. If I went off on a journey round the world to-morrow, she'd see me go quite cheerfully, and she'd wait serenely till I came back again. She'd never fret. Above all, she'd never dream of coming to look for me."

The passionate utterance went into a sound that resembled a laugh, but it was a sound of such bitterness that Crowther was strongly moved.

He put his hand on Piers' shoulder and gave it an admonitory shake. "My dear lad, don't be a fool!" he said, with slow force. "You're consuming your own happiness—and hers too. You can't measure a woman's feelings like that. They are immeasurable. You can't even begin to fathom a woman's restraint—a woman's reserve. How can she offer when you are always demanding? As to her love, it is probably as infinitely great, as infinitely deep, as infinitely selfless, as yours is passionate, and fierce and insatiable. There are big possibilities in you, Piers; but you're not letting 'em grow. It would have done you good to have been kept waiting ten years or more. You're spoilt; that's what's the matter with you. You got your heart's desire too easily. You think this world is your own damn'

playground. And it isn't. Understand? You're put here to work, not play; to develop yourself, not batten on other people. You won her like a man in the face of desperate odds. You paid a heavy price for her. But even so, you don't deserve to keep her if you forget that she has paid too. By Heaven, Piers, she must have loved you a mighty lot to have done it!"

He paused, for Piers had made a sharp, involuntary movement as of a man in intolerable pain. He almost wrenched himself from Crowther's hand, and walked to the low wall of the terrace. Here he stood for many seconds quite motionless, gazing down over the quiet garden.

Finally he swung round, and looked at Crowther. "Yes," he said, in an odd tone as of one repeating something learned by heart. "I've got to remember that, haven't I? Thanks for—reminding me!" He stopped, seemed to collect himself, moved slowly forward. "You're a good chap, Crowther," he said. "I wonder you've never got married yourself—what?"

Crowther waited for him quietly, in his eyes that look of the man who has gazed for long over the wide spaces of the earth.

"I never married, sonny," he said, "because I had nothing to offer to the woman I cared for, and so—she never knew."

"By gad, old chap, I'm sorry," said Piers impulsively.

Crowther held out a steady hand. "I'm happy enough," he said simply. "I've got—all I want."

"All?" echoed Piers incredulously.

Crowther was smiling. He lifted his face to the night sky. "Yes—thank God—all!" he said.

CHAPTER V

THE SWORD FALLS

AS Miss Whalley had predicted, Ina Rose's wedding was a very grand affair indeed. Everyone who was anyone attended it, and a good many besides. It took place in the midst of a spell of sultry weather, during which the sun shone day after day with brazen strength, and the heat was intense.

It was the sort of weather Piers revelled in. It suited his tropical nature. But it affected Avery very differently. All her customary energy wilted before it, and yet she was strangely restless also. A great reluctance to attend the wedding possessed her, wherefore she could not have said. But for some reason Piers was determined that she should go. He was even somewhat tyrannical on the subject, and rather than have a discussion Avery had yielded the point. For Piers was oddly difficult in those days. Crowther's visit, which had barely run into forty-eight hours, seemed to have had a disquieting effect upon him. There had developed a curious, new-born mastery in his attitude towards her, which she sometimes found it hard to endure. She missed the chivalry of the earlier days. She missed the sweetness of his boyish adoration.

She did not understand him, but she knew that he was not happy. He never took her into his confidence, never alluded by word or sign to the change which he must have realized that she could not fail to notice. And Avery on her part made no further effort to open the door that was so strenuously locked against her. With an aching heart she gave herself to the weary task of waiting, convinced that sooner or later the nature of the barrier which he so stubbornly ignored would be revealed to her. But it was impossible to extend her full confidence to him. Moreover, he seemed to shrink from all intimate subjects. Instinctively and wholly involuntarily she withdrew into herself, meeting reserve with reserve. Since he had become master rather than lover, she yielded him obedience, and she hid away her love, not deliberately or intentionally, but rather with the impulse to protect from outrage that which was holy. He was not asking love of her just then.

She saw but little of him during the day. He was busy on the estate, busy with the coming election, busy with a hundred and one matters that evidently occupied his thoughts very fully. The heat seemed to imbue him with inexhaustible energy. He never seemed tired after the most strenuous exertion. He never slacked for a moment, or seemed to have a moment to spare till the day was done. He was generally late for meals, and always raced through them at a speed that Avery was powerless to emulate.

He was late on the day of Ina Rose's wedding, so late

that Avery, who had dressed in good time and was lying on the sofa in her room, began to wonder if he had after all abandoned the idea of going. But she presently heard him race into his own room, and immediately there came the active patter of Victor's feet as he waited upon him.

She lay still, listening, wishing that the wedding were over, morbidly dreading the heat and crush and excitement which she knew awaited her, and to which she felt utterly unequal.

A quarter of an hour passed, then impetuously, without preliminary, her door opened and Piers stood on the threshold. He had the light behind him, for Avery had lowered the blinds, and so seeing him, she was conscious of a sudden thrill of admiration. For he stood before her like a prince. She had never seen him look more handsome, more patrician, more tragically like that woman in the picture-frame downstairs who smiled so perpetually upon them both.

He came to her with his light, athletic tread, stooped, and lifted her bodily in his arms. He held her a moment before he set her on her feet, and then in his hot, fierce way, he kissed her.

"You beautiful ghost!" he said.

She leaned against him, breathing rather hard. "I wish —I wish we needn't go," she said.

"Why?" said Piers.

He held her to him, gazing down at her with his eyes of fiery possession that always made her close her own.

"Because—because it's so hot," she said quiveringly. "There will be no one I know there. And I—and I——"

"That's just why you are going," he broke in. "Don't you know it will be your introduction to the county? You've got to find your footing, Avery. I'm not going to have my wife overlooked by anyone."

"Oh, my dear," she said, with a faint laugh. "I don't care two straws about the county. They've seen me once already, most of them—in a ditch and covered with mud. If they want to renew the acquaintance they can come and call."

He kissed her again with lips that crushed her own. "We won't stay longer than we can help," he said. "You ought to go out more, you know. It isn't good for you to stay in this gloomy old vault all day. We will really get to work

and make it more habitable presently. But I've got such a lot on hand just now."

"I know," she said quietly. "Please don't bother about me! Lunch is waiting for us. Shall we go?"

He gave her a quick, keen look, as if he suspected her of trying to elude him; but he let her go without a word.

They descended to lunch, and later went forth into the blazing sunshine where the car awaited them. Avery sank back into the corner and closed her eyes. Her head was aching violently. The sense of reluctance that had possessed her for so long amounted almost to a premonition of evil.

"Avery!" Her husband's voice, curt, imperious, with just a tinge of anxiety broke in upon her. "Are you feeling faint or anything?"

She looked at him. He was watching her with a frown between his eyes.

"No, I am not faint," she said. "The heat makes my head ache, that's all."

"You ought to see a doctor," he said restlessly. "But not that ass Tudor. We'll go up to town to-morrow. Avery"—his voice softened suddenly—"I'm sorry I dragged you here if you didn't want to come."

She put out her hand to him instantly. It was the old Piers who had spoken, Piers the boy lover who had won her heart so irresistibly, so completely.

He held the hand tightly, and she thought his face quivered a little as he said, "I don't mean to be a tyrant, dear. But somehow—somehow, you know—I can't always help it. A man with a raging thirst will take—anything he can get."

His eyes were still upon her, and her heart quickened to compassion at their look. They seemed to cry to her for mercy out of a depth of suffering that she could not bear to contemplate.

She leaned swiftly towards him. "Piers—my dear—what is it? What is it?" she said, under her breath.

But in that instant the look vanished. The old fierce flare of passion blazed forth upon her, held her burningly, till finally she drew back before it in mute protest. "So you will forgive me," he said, in a tone that seemed to contain something of a jeering quality. "We all are human—what? You're looking better now. Egad, Avery, you're splendid!"

Her heart died within her. She turned her face away, as one ashamed.

The church at Wardenhurst was thronged with a chattering crowd of guests. They arrived late, so late that they had some difficulty in finding seats. Tudor, who was present and looking grimly disgusted with himself, spied them at length, and gave up his place to Avery.

The bride entered almost immediately afterwards, young, lovely, with the air of a queen passing through her subjects. Dick Guyes at the altar was shaking with nervousness, but Ina was supremely self-possessed. She even sent a smile of casual greeting to Piers as she went.

She maintained her attitude of complete *sang-froid* throughout the service, and Piers watched her critically, with that secret smile at the corners of his lips which was not good to see.

He did not seem aware of anyone else in the church till the service was over, and the strains of the Wedding March were crashing through the building. Then very suddenly he turned and looked at his wife—with that in his dark eyes that thrilled her to the soul.

A man's voice accosted him somewhat abruptly. "Are you Sir Piers Evesham? I'm the best man. They want you to sign the register."

Piers started as one rudely awakened from an entrancing dream. An impatient exclamation rose to his lips which he suppressed rather badly. He surveyed the man who addressed him with a touch of hauteur.

Avery surveyed him also, and was not very favourably impressed. He was a small man with thick sandy eyebrows and shifty, uncertain eyes. He looked hard at Piers in answer to the latter's haughty regard, and Avery became aware of a sudden sharp change in his demeanour as he did so. He opened his eyes and stared in blank astonishment.

"Hullo!" he ejaculated softly. "You!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Piers.

It was a challenge, albeit spoken in an undertone. He stood like a man transfixed as he uttered it. There came to Avery a quick, hot impulse to intervene, to protect him from some hidden danger, she knew not what, that had risen like a serpent in his path. But before she could take any action, the critical moment was passed. Piers had recovered himself.

He stepped forward. "All right. I will come," he said.

She watched him move away in the direction of the vestry with that free, proud gait of his, and a great coldness came down upon her, wrapping her round, penetrating to her very soul. Who was that man with the shifty eyes? Why had he stared at Piers so? Above all, why had Piers stood with that stiff immobility of shock as though he had been stabbed in the back?

A voice spoke close to her. "Lady Evesham, come and wait by the door! There is more air there."

She turned her head mechanically, and looked at Lennox Tudor with eyes that saw not. There was a singing in her ears that made the crashing chords of the organ sound confused and jumbled.

His hand closed firmly, sustainingly, upon her elbow.

"Come with me!" he said.

She went with him blindly, unconscious of the curious eyes that watched her go.

He led her quietly down the church and into the porch. The air from outside, albeit hot and sultry, was less oppressive than within. She drew great breaths of relief as it reached her. The icy grip at her heart seemed to relax.

Tudor watched her narrowly. "What madness brought you here?" he said presently, as she turned at last and mustered a smile of thanks.

She countered the question. "I might ask you the same," she said.

His eyes contracted behind the shielding glasses. "So you might," he said briefly. "Well—I came on the chance of meeting you."

"Of meeting me!" She looked at him in surprise.

He nodded. "Just so. I want a word with you; but it can't be said here. Give me an opportunity later if you can!"

His hand fell away from her elbow; he drew back. The bridal procession was coming down the church.

Ina was flushed and laughing, Dick Guyes still obviously nervous, but, also obviously, supremely happy. They went by Avery into a perfect storm of rose-leaves that awaited them from the crowd outside. Yet for one moment the eyes of the bride rested upon Avery, meeting hers almost

as if they would ask her a question. And behind her—immediately behind her—came Piers.

His eyes also found Avery, and in an instant with a haughty disregard of Tudor, he had swept her forward with him, his arm thrust imperially through hers. They also weathered the storm of rose-leaves, and as they went Avery heard him laugh—the laugh of the man who fights with his back to the wall.

They were among the first to offer congratulations to the bride and bridegroom, and again Avery was aware of the girl's eyes searching hers.

"I haven't forgotten you," she said, as they shook hands. "I knew you would be Lady Evesham sooner or later after that day when you kept the whole Hunt at bay."

Avery felt herself flush. There seemed to her to be a covert insinuation in the remark. "I was very grateful to you for taking my part," she said.

"It was rather generous certainly," agreed the bride coolly. "Dick, do get off my train! You're horribly clumsy to-day."

The bridegroom hastened to remove himself to a respectful distance, while Ina turned her pretty cheek to Piers. "You may salute the bride," she said graciously. "It's the only opportunity you will ever have."

Piers kissed the cheek as airily as it was proffered, his dark eyes openly mocking. "Good luck to you, Ina!" he said lightly. "I wish you the first and best of all that's most worth having."

Her red lips curled in answer. "You are superlatively kind," she said.

Other guests came crowding round with congratulations, and they moved on.

Piers knew everyone there, and presented one after another to his wife till she felt absolutely bewildered. He did not present the best man, who to her relief seemed disposed to keep out of their way. She wondered greatly if anything had passed between him and Piers, though by the latter, at least, the incident seemed to be wholly forgotten. He was in his gayest, most sparkling mood, and she could not fail to see that he was very popular whichever way he turned. People kept claiming his attention, and though he tried to remain near her he was drawn away at last by the bridegroom himself.

Avery looked round her then for a quiet corner where Tudor might find her if he so desired, but while she was searching she came upon Tudor himself.

He joined her immediately, with evident relief. "For heaven's sake, let us get away from this gibbering crowd!" he said. "They are like a horde of painted monkeys. Come along to the library! I don't think there are many people there."

Avery accompanied him, equally thankful to escape.

They found the library deserted, and Tudor made her sit down by the window in the most comfortable chair it contained.

"You look about as fit for this sort of show as Mrs. Lorimer," he observed dryly. "She had the sense to stay away."

"I couldn't," Avery said.

"For goodness' sake," he exclaimed roughly, "don't let that young ruffian tyrannize over you! You will never know any peace if you do."

Avery smiled a little and was silent.

"Why are you so painfully thin?" he pursued relentlessly. "What's the matter with you? When I saw you in church just now I had a positive shock."

She put out her hand to him. "I am quite all right," she assured him, still faintly smiling. "I should have sent for you if I hadn't been."

"It's high time you sent for me now," said Tudor.

He looked at her searchingly through his glasses, holding her hand firmly clasped in his.

"Are you happy?" he asked her suddenly.

She started at the question, started and flushed. "Why—why do you ask me that?" she said in confusion.

"Because you don't look it," he said plainly. "No, don't be vexed with me! I speak as a friend—a friend who desires your happiness more than anything else on earth. And do you know, I think I should see a doctor pretty soon if I were you. If you don't, you will probably regret it. Get Piers to take you up to town! Maxwell Wyndham is about the best man I know. Go to him!"

"Thank you," Avery said. "Perhaps I will."

It was at this point that a sudden uproarious laugh sounded from below the window near which they sat. Avery looked round startled, and Tudor frowned.

"It's that little brute of a best man—drunk as a lord. He's some sort of cousin of Guyes', just home from Australia; and the sooner he goes back the better for the community at large, I should say."

"Piers knows him!" broke almost involuntarily from Avery.

And with that swiftly she turned her head to listen, for the man outside had evidently gathered to himself an audience at the entrance of a tent that had been erected for refreshments, and was declaiming at the top of his voice.

"Eric Denys was the name of the man. He was a chum of mine. Samson we used to call him. This Evesham fellow killed him in the first round. I've never forgotten it. I recognized him the minute I set eyes on him, though it's years ago now. And he recognized me! I wish you'd seen his face!" Again came the uncontrolled, ribald laughter. "A bully sort of squire, eh? I suppose he's a justice of the peace now, a law-giver, eh? Damn' funny, I call it!"

Tudor was on his feet. He looked at Avery, but she sat like a statue, making no sign.

Another man was speaking in a lower tone, as though he were trying to restrain the first; but his efforts were plainly useless, for the best man had more to say.

"Oh, I can tell you a Queensland crowd is no joke. He'd have been manhandled if he hadn't bolted. Mistaken? Not I! Could anyone mistake a face like that? Go and ask the man himself, if you don't believe me! You'll find he won't deny it!"

"Shall we go?" suggested Tudor brusquely.

Avery made a slight movement, wholly mechanical; but she did not turn her head. Her whole attitude was one of tense listening.

"I think I'll go, in any case," said Tudor, after a moment. "That fellow will make an exhibition of himself if someone doesn't interfere."

He went to the door, but before he reached it Avery turned in her chair and spoke.

"He has gone inside for another drink. You had better let him have it."

There was that in her voice that he had never heard before. He stopped short, looking back at her.

"Let him have it!" she reiterated. "Let him soak himself with it! You won't quiet him any other way."

Even as she spoke, that horrible, half-intoxicated laugh came to them, insulting the beauty of the summer afternoon. Avery shivered from head to foot.

"Don't go!" she said. "Please!"

She rose as Tudor came back, rose and faced him, her face like death.

"I think I must go home," she said. "Will you find the car? No, I am not ill. I——" She paused, seemed to grope for words, stopped, and suddenly a bewildered look came into her face. Her eyes dilated. She gave a sharp gasp. Tudor caught her as she fell. . . .

CHAPTER VI

THE MASK

THE bride and bridegroom departed amid a storm of rice and good wishes, Ina's face wearing that slightly contemptuous smile to the last. Piers, in the foremost of the crowd, threw a handful straight into her lap as the car started, but only he and Dick Guyes saw her gather it up with sudden energy and fling it back in his face.

Piers dropped off the step laughing. "Ye gods! What fun for Dick Guyes!" he said.

A hand grasped his shoulder, and he turned and saw Lennox Tudor.

"Hullo!" he said, sharply freeing himself.

"I want a word with you," said Tudor briefly.

A wary look came into Piers' face on the instant. He looked at Tudor with the measuring eye of a fencer.

"What about?" he asked.

"I can't tell you here. Will you walk back with me? Lady Evesham has already gone in the car."

Piers' black brows went up. "Why was that? Wasn't she well?"

"No," said Tudor curtly.

"But she will send the car back," said Piers, stubbornly refusing to betray himself.

"No, she won't. I told her we would walk."

"The devil you did!" said Piers.

He turned his back on Tudor, and went into the house.

But Tudor was undaunted. In a battle of wills, he was fully a match for Piers. He kept close behind.

Eventually Piers turned upon him. "Look here! I'll give you five minutes in the library. I'm not going to walk three miles with you in this blazing heat. It would be damned unhealthy for us both. Moreover, I've promised to spend the evening with Colonel Rose."

It was the utmost he could hope for, and Tudor had the sense to accept what he could get. He followed him to the library in silence.

They found it empty, and Tudor quietly turned the key.

"What's that for?" demanded Piers sharply.

"Because I don't want to be disturbed," returned Tudor.

He moved forward into the middle of the room and faced Piers.

"I have an unpleasant piece of news for you," he said, in a grim, emotionless voice. "That cousin of Guyes'—you have met him before, I think? He claims to know something of your past, and he has been talking—somewhat freely."

"What has he been saying?" said Piers.

He stood up before Tudor with the arrogance of a man who mocks defeat, but there was a gleam of desperation in his eyes—something of the cornered animal in his very nonchalance.

A queer touch of pity moved Tudor from his attitude of cold informer. There was an undercurrent of something that was almost sympathy in his voice as he made reply:

"The fellow was more or less drunk, but I am afraid he was rather circumstantial. He recognized in you a man who had killed some chum of his years ago, in Queensland."

"Well?" said Piers.

Just the one word, uttered like a command! Tudor's softer impulse passed.

"He was bawling it out at the top of his voice. A good many people must have heard him. I was in this room with Lady Evesham. We heard also."

"Well?" Piers said again.

He spoke without stirring an eyelid, and again involun-

tarily, Tudor was moved, this time with a species of unwilling admiration. The fellow was no coward, at least.

He went on steadily: "It was impossible not to hear what the beast said. He mentioned names also—your name and the name of the man whom he alleged you had killed. Lady Evesham heard it. We both heard it."

He paused. Piers had not moved. His face was like a mask in its composure, but it was a dreadful mask. Tudor had a feeling that it hid unutterable things.

"What was the man's name?" Piers asked, after a moment.

"Denys—Eric Denys."

Piers nodded, as one verifying a piece of information. His next question came with hauteur and studied indifference.

"Lady Evesham heard, you say? Did she pay any attention to these maudlin revelations?"

"She fainted," said Tudor shortly.

"Oh? And what happened then?"

It was maddeningly cold-blooded; but it was the mask that spoke. Tudor recognized that.

"I brought her round," he made answer. "No one else was present. She begged me to let her go home alone. I did so."

"She also asked you to make full explanation to me?" came in measured tones from Piers.

"She did." Tudor paused a moment as though he found some difficulty in forming his next words. But he went on almost at once with resolution. "She said to me at parting: 'I must be alone. I must think. Beg Piers to understand! Beg him not to see me again to-day! I will talk to him in the morning!' I promised to deliver the message exactly as she gave it."

"Thank you," said Piers. He turned with the words, moved away to the window, and looked forth at the now deserted marquee.

Tudor stood mutely waiting; he felt as if it had been laid upon him to wait.

Suddenly Piers jerked his head round and glanced at the chair in which Avery had been sitting, then abruptly turned himself and looked at Tudor.

"What were you—and my wife—doing in here?" he said.

Tudor frowned impatiently at the question. "Oh, don't be a fool, Evesham!" he said with vehemence.

"I'm not a fool." Piers left the window with the gait of a prowling animal; he stood again face to face with the other man. But though his features were still mask-like, his eyes shone through the mask; and they were eyes of leaping flame. "Oh, I am no fool, I assure you," he said, and in his voice there sounded a deep vibration that was almost like a snarl. "I know you too well by this time to be hoodwinked. You would come between us if you could."

"You lie!" said Tudor.

He did not raise his voice or speak in haste. His vehemence had departed. He simply made the statement as if it had been a wholly impersonal one.

Piers' hands clenched, but they remained at his sides. He looked at Tudor hard, as if he did not understand him.

After a moment Tudor spoke again. "I am no friend of yours, and I never shall be. But I am the friend of your wife, and—whether you like it or not—I shall remain so. For that reason, whatever I do will be in your interests as well as hers. I have not the smallest intention or desire to come between you. And if you use your wits you will see that I couldn't if I tried. Your marriage with her tied my hands."

"What proof have I of that?" said Piers, his voice low and fierce.

Tudor made a slight gesture of disgust. "I am dealing with facts, not proofs," he said. "You know as well as I do that though you obtained her love on false pretences, still you obtained it. Whether you will keep it or not remains to be seen, but she is not the sort of woman to solace herself with anyone else. If you lose it, it will be because you failed to guard your own property—not because anyone deprived you of it."

"Damnation!" exclaimed Piers furiously, and with the word the storm of his anger broke like a fiery torrent, sweeping all before it, "are you taking me to task, you—you—for this accursed trick of Fate? How was I to know that this infernal little sot would turn up here? Why, I don't so much as know the fellow's name! I had forgotten his very existence! Where the devil is he? Let me find him,

and break every bone in his body!" He whirled round to the door, but in a moment was back again. "Tudor! Damn you! Where's the key?"

"In my pocket," said Tudor quietly. "And, Piers, before you go—since I am your ally in spite of myself—let me warn you to keep your head! There's no sense in murdering another man. It won't improve your case. There's no sense in running amok. Sit down for heaven's sake, and review the situation quietly!"

The calm words took effect. Piers stopped, arrested in spite of himself by the other's steady insistence. He looked at Tudor with half-sullen respect dawning behind his ungoverned fury.

"Listen!" Tudor said. "The fellow has gone. I packed him off myself. It was a piece of sheer ill-luck that brought him home in time for this show. He starts for America *en route* for Australia in less than a week, and it is utterly unlikely that either you or any of your friends will see or hear anything more of him. Guyes himself is by no means keen on him, and only had him as best man because a friend failed him at the last minute. If you behave rationally the whole affair will probably pass off of itself. Everyone knows the fellow was intoxicated, and no one is likely to pay any lasting attention to what he said. Treat the matter as unworthy of notice, and you will very possibly hear no more of it! But if you kick up a row, you will simply court disaster. I am an older man than you are. Take my word for it—I know what I am talking about."

Piers listened in silence. The heat had gone from his face, but his eyes still gleamed with a restless fire.

Tudor watched him keenly. Not by his own choice would he have ranged himself on Piers' side, but circumstances having placed him there, he was oddly anxious to effect his deliverance. He was fighting heavy odds, and he knew it, but there was a fighting strain in his nature also. He relished the odds.

"For heaven's sake don't be a fool and give the whole show away!" he urged. "You have no enemies. No one will want to take the matter up if you will only let it lie. No one wants to believe evil of you. Possibly no one will."

"Except yourself!" said Piers, with a smile that showed his set teeth.

"Quite so." Tudor also smiled, a grim, brief smile. "But then I happen to know you better than most. You gave yourself away so far as I am concerned that night in the winter. I knew then that once upon a time in your career —you had—killed a man."

"And you didn't tell Avery!" The words shot out unexpectedly. Piers was plainly astonished.

"I'm not a woman!" said Tudor contemptuously. "That affair was between us two."

"Great Scot!" said Piers.

"At the same time," Tudor continued sternly, "if I had known what I know now, I would have told her everything sooner than let her ruin her happiness by marrying you."

Piers made a sharp gesture that passed unexplained. He had made no attempt at self-defence; he made none then. Perhaps his pride kicked at the idea; perhaps in the face of Tudor's shrewd grip of the situation it did not seem worth while.

He held out his hand. "May I have that key?"

Tudor gave it to him. He was still watching narrowly but Piers' face told him nothing. The mask had been replaced, and the man behind it was securely hidden from scrutiny. Tudor would have given much to have rent it aside, and have read the thoughts and intentions it covered. But he knew that he was powerless. He knew that he was deliberately barred out.

Piers went to the door and fitted the key into the lock. His actions were all grimly deliberate. The volcanic fires which Tudor had seen raging but a few seconds before had sunk very far below the surface. Whatever was happening in the torture-chamber where his soul agonized, it was certain that no human being—save possibly one—would ever witness it. What he suffered he would suffer in proud aloofness and silence. It was only the effect of that suffering that could ever be made apparent, when the soul came forth again, blackened and shrivelled from the furnace.

Yet ere he left Tudor, some impulse moved him to look back. He met Tudor's gaze with brooding eyes which nevertheless held a faint warmth like the dim reflection of a light below the horizon.

"I am obliged to you," he said, and was gone before Tudor could speak again.

CHAPTER VII

THE GATES OF HELL

UP and down, up and down, in a fever of restlessness, Avery walked. She felt trapped. The gloomy, tapestried room seemed to close her in like a prison. The whole world seemed to have turned into a monstrous place of punishment. One thing only was needed to complete the anguish of her spirit, and that was the presence of her husband.

She could not picture the meeting with him. Body and soul recoiled from the thought. It would not be till the morning; that was her sole comfort. By the morning this fiery suffering would have somewhat abated. She would be calmer, more able to face him and hear his defence—if defence there could be. Somehow she never questioned the truth of the story. She knew that Tudor had not questioned it either. She knew moreover that had it been untrue, Piers would have been with her long ago in vehement indignation and wrath.

No, the thing was true. He was the man who had wrecked her life at its beginning, and now—now he had wrecked it again. He was the man whose hands were stained with her husband's blood. He had done the deed in one of those wild tempests of anger with which she was so familiar. He had done the deed, possibly unintentionally, but certainly with murderous impulse; and then deliberately, cynically, he had covered it up, and gone his arrogant way.

He had met her, he had desired her; with a few, quickly-stifled qualms he had won her, trusting to luck that his sin would never find him out. And so he had made her his own, his property, his prisoner, the slave of his pleasure. She was bound for ever to her husband's murderer.

Again body and soul shrank in quivering horror from the thought, and a wild revolt awoke within her. She could not bear it. She must break free. The bare memory of his passion sickened her. For the first time in her life hatred, fiery, intense, kindled within her. The thought of his touch

filled her with a loathing unutterable. He had become horrible to her, a thing unclean, abominable, whose very proximity was pollution. She felt as if the blood on his hands had stained her also—the blood of the man she had once loved. For a space she became like a woman demented. The thing was too abhorrent to be endured.

And then by slow degrees her brain began to clear again. She grew a little calmer. Monstrous though he was, he was still human. He was, in a fashion, at her mercy. He had sinned, but it was in her hands that his punishment lay.

She was stronger than he. She had always known it. But she must keep her strength. She must not waste it in futile resentment. She would need it all. He had entered her kingdom by subtlety; but she would drive him forth in the strength of a righteous indignation. To suffer him to remain was unthinkable. It would be to share his guilt.

Her thoughts tried to wander into the future, but she called them resolutely back. The future would provide for itself. Her immediate duty was all she now needed to face. When that dreaded interview was over, when she had shut him out finally and completely, then it would be time enough to consider that. Probably some arrangement would have to be made by which they would meet occasionally, but as husband and wife—never, never more.

It was growing late. The dinner-gong had sounded, but she would not go down. She rang for Victor, and told him to bring her something on a tray. It did not matter what.

He looked at her with keen little eyes of solicitude, and swiftly obeyed her desire. He then asked her if the dinner were to be kept for *Monsieur Pierre*, who had not yet returned. She did not know what to say, but lest he should wonder at her ignorance of Piers' doings, she answered in the negative, and Victor withdrew.

Then, again lest comment should be made, she forced herself to eat and drink, though the food nauseated her. A feeling of sick suspense was growing upon her, a strange, foreboding fear that hung leaden about her heart. What was Piers doing all this time? What effect had that message, delivered by Tudor, had upon him? Why had he not returned?

Time passed. The evening waned and became night. A full moon rose red and wonderful out of a bank of inky cloud,

lighting the darkness with an oddly tropical effect. The night was tropical, breathless, terribly still. It seemed as if a storm must be upon its way.

She began to undress at last there in the moonlight. The heat was too intense to ve.. the windows, and she would not light the candles lest bats or moths should be attracted. At another time the eeriness of the shadowy room would have played upon her nerves, but to-night she was not even aware of it. The shadows within were too dark, too sinister.

A great weariness had come upon her. She ached for rest. Her body felt leaden, and her brain like a burnt-out furnace. The very capacity for thought seemed to have left her. Only the horror of the day loomed gigantic whichever way she turned, blotting out all beside. Prayer was an impossibility to her. She felt lost in a wilderness of doubt, forsaken and wandering, and terribly alone.

If she could rest, if she could sleep, she thought that strength might return to her—the strength to grapple with and overthrow the evil that had entered into and tainted her whole life. But till sleep should come to her she was impotent. She was heavy and numb with fatigue.

She lay down at length with a vague sense of physical relief beneath her crushing weight of trouble. How unutterably weary she was! How tired—how tired of life!

Time passed. The moon rose higher, filling the room with its weird, cold light. Avery lay asleep.

Exhaustion had done for her what no effort of will could have accomplished, closing her eyes, drawing a soft veil of oblivion across her misery.

But it was only a temporary lull. The senses were too alert, too fevered, for true repose. That blessed interval of unconsciousness was all too short. After a brief, brief respite she began to dream.

And in her dream she saw a man being tortured in a burning, fiery furnace, imprisoned behind bars of iron, writhing, wrestling, agonizing to be free. She saw the flames leaping all around him, and in the flames were demon faces that laughed and gibed and jested. She saw his hands, all blistered in the heat, reaching out to her, straining through those cruel bars, beseeching her vainly for deliverance. And presently, gazing with a sick horror that compelled, she saw his face. . . .

With a gasping cry she awoke, started up with every nerve stretched and quivering, her heart pounding as if it would choke her. It was a dream—it was a dream! She whispered it to herself over and over again, striving to control those awful palpitations. Surely it was all a dream!

Stay! What was that? A sound in the room beyond—a movement—a step! She sprang up, obeying blind impulse, sped softly to the intervening door, with hands that trembled shot the bolt. Then, like a hunted creature, almost distracted by the panic of her dream, she slipped back to the gloomy four-poster, and cowered down again.

Lying there, crouched and quivering, she began to count those hammering heart-beats, and wondered wildly if the man on the other side of the door could hear them also. She was sure that he had been there, sure that he had been on the point of entering when she had shot the bolt.

He would not enter now, she whispered to her quaking heart. She would not have to meet him before the morning. And by then she would be strong. It was only her weariness that made her so weak to-night!

She grew calmer. She began to chide herself for her senseless panic—she, the bearer of other people's burdens, who prided herself upon her steady nerve and calmness of purpose. She had never been hysterical in her life before. Surely she could muster self-control now, when her need of it was so urgent, so imperative.

And then, just as a certain measure of composure had returned to her, something happened. Someone passed down the passage outside her room and paused at the outer door. Her heart stood still, but again desperately she steadied herself. That door was bolted also.

Yes, it was bolted, but there was a hand upon it—a hand that felt softly for the lock, found the key outside, softly turned it.

Then indeed panic came upon Avery. Lying there, tense and listening, she heard the quiet step return along the passage and enter her husband's room, heard that door also close and lock, and knew herself a prisoner.

"Avery!"

Every pulse leaped, every nerve shrank. She started up, wide-eyed, desperate.

"I will talk to you in the morning, Piers," she said, steadying her voice with difficulty. "Not now! Not now!"

"Open this door!" he said.

There was clear command in his voice, and with it the old magnetic force reached her, quick, insistent, vital. She threw a wild look round, but only the dazzling moonlight met her eyes. There was no escape for her—no escape.

She turned her face to the door behind which he stood. "Piers, please, not to-night!" she said beseechingly.

"Open the door!" he repeated inexorably.

Again that force reached her. It was like an electric current suddenly injected into her veins. Her whole body quivered in response. Almost before she knew it, she had started to obey.

And then horror seized her—a dread unutterable. She stopped.

"Piers, will you promise——"

"I promise nothing," he said, in the same clear, imperious voice, "except to force this door unless you open it within five seconds."

She stood in the moonlight, trembling, unnerved. He did not sound like a man bereft of reason. And yet—and yet—something in his voice appalled her. Her strength was utterly gone. She was just a weak, terrified woman.

"Avery," his voice came to her again, short and stern, "I don't wish to threaten you; but it will be better for us both if I don't have to force the door."

She forced herself to speak, though her tongue felt stiff and dry. "I can't let you in now," she said. "I will hear what you have to say in the morning."

He made no reply. There was an instant of dead silence. Then there came a sudden, hideous shock against the panel of the door. The socket of the bolt gave with the strain, but did not wholly yield. Avery shrank back trembling against the shadowy four-poster. She felt as if a raging animal were trying to force an entrance.

Again came that awful shock. The wood splintered and rent, socket and bolt were torn free; the door burst inwards.

There came a brief, fiendish laugh, and Piers broke in upon her.

He recovered himself with a sharp effort, and stood breathing heavily, looking at her. The moonlight was full

upon him, showing him deadly pale, and in his eyes there shone the red glare of hell.

"Did you really think—a locked door—would keep me out?" he said, speaking with an odd jerkiness, with lips that twitched.

She drew herself together with an instinctive effort at self-control. "I thought you would respect my wish," she said, her voice very low.

"Did you?" said Piers. "Then why did you lock the door?"

He swung it closed behind him and came to her.

"Listen to me, Avery!" he said. "You are not your own any longer—to give or to take away. You are mine."

She faced him with all the strength she could muster, but she could not meet those awful eyes that mocked her, that devoured her.

"Piers," she said, almost under her breath, "remember—what happens to-night we shall neither of us ever forget. Don't make me hate you!"

"Haven't you begun to hate me, then?" he demanded. "Would you have locked that door against me if you hadn't?"

She heard the rising passion in his voice, and her heart fainted within her. Yet still desperately she strove for strength.

"I don't want to do anything violent or unconsidered. I must have time to think. Piers, you have me at your mercy. Be merciful!"

He made a sharp movement. "Are you going to be merciful to me?" he said.

She hesitated. There was something brutal in the question, yet it pierced her. She knew that he had divined all that had been passing within her during that evening of misery. She did not answer him, for she could not.

"Listen!" he said again. "What has happened has happened by sheer ill-luck. The past is nothing to you. You have said so yourself. The future shall not be sacrificed to it. If you will give me your solemn promise to put this thing behind you, to behave as if it had never been, I will respect your wishes, I will do my utmost to help you to forget. But if you refuse——" He stopped.

"If I refuse——" she repeated faintly.

He made again that curious gesture that was almost one of helplessness. "Don't ask for mercy!" he said.

In the silence that followed there came to her the certain knowledge that he was suffering, that he was in an inferno of torment that goaded him into fierce savagery against her, like a mad animal that will wreak its madness first upon the being most beloved. It was out of his torment that he did this thing. She saw him again agonizing in the flames.

If he had had patience then, that divine pity of hers might have come to help them both; but he read into her silence the abhorrence which a little earlier had possessed her soul, and the maddening pain of it drove him beyond all bounds.

He seized her suddenly and savagely between his hands. "Are you any the less my wife," he said, speaking between his teeth, "because you have found out what manner of man I am?"

She resisted him, swiftly, instinctively, her hands against his breast, pressing him back. "I may be your wife," she said gaspingly. "I am not—your slave."

He laughed a fiendish laugh. Her resistance fired him. He caught her fiercely to him. He covered her face, her throat, her arms, her hands, with kisses that burned her through and through, seeming to sear her very soul.

He crushed her in a grip that bruised her, that suffocated her. He pressed his lips, hot with passion, to hers.

"And now!" he said. "And now!"

She lay in his arms spent and quivering and helpless. The cruel triumph of his voice silenced all appeal.

He went on deeply, speaking with his lips so close that she felt his breath scorch through her like the breath of a fiery furnace.

"You are bound to me for better—for worse, and nothing will ever set you free. Do you understand? If you will not be my wife, you shall be—my slave."

Quiveringly, through lips that would scarcely move, she spoke at last: "I shall never forgive you."

"I shall never ask your forgiveness," he said.

So the gates of hell closed upon Avery also. She went down into the unknown depths. And in an agony of shame she learned the bitterest lesson of her life.

CHAPTER VIII

A FRIEND IN NEED

"WHY, Avery dear, is it you? Come in!" Mrs. Lorimer looked up with a smile of eager welcome on her little pinched face and went forward almost at a run to greet her.

The brown holland smock upon which she had been at work fell to the ground. It was Avery who, after a close embrace, stooped to pick it up.

"Who is this for? Baby Phil? You must let me lend a hand," she said.

"Ah, my dear, I do miss you," said Mrs. Lorimer wistfully. "The village girl who comes in to help is no good at all at needlework, and you know how busy nurse always is. Jeanie does her best, and is a great help in many ways. But she is but a child. However"—she caught herself up—"I mustn't start grumbling the moment you enter the house. Tell me about yourself, dear! You are looking very pale. Does the heat try you?"

"A little," Avery admitted.

She was spreading out the small garment on her knee, looking at it critically, with eyes downcast. She certainly was pale that morning. The only colour in her face seemed concentrated in her lips.

Mrs. Lorimer looked at her uneasily. There was something not quite normal about her, she felt. She had never seen Avery look so statuesque. She missed the quick sweetness of her smile, the brightness and animation of her glance.

"It is very dear of you to come and see me," she said gently, after a moment. "Did you walk all the way? I hope it hasn't been too much for you."

"No," Avery said. "It did me good."

She was on the verge of saying something further, but the words did not come.

She continued to smooth out the little smock with minute care, while Mrs. Lorimer watched her anxiously.

"Is all well, dear?" she ventured at last.

Avery raised her brows slightly, but her eyes remained downcast. "I went to the wedding yesterday," she said, after a momentary pause.

"Oh, did you, dear? Stephen went, but I stayed at home. Did you see him?"

"Only from a distance," said Avery.

"It was a very magnificent affair, he tells me." Mrs. Lorimer was becoming a little nervous. She had begun to be conscious of something tragic in the atmosphere. "And did you enjoy it, dear? Or was the heat too great?"

"It was hot," Avery said.

Again she seemed to be about to say something more, and again she failed to do so. Her lips closed.

Mrs. Lorimer remained silent also for several seconds. Then softly she rose, went to Avery, put her arms about her.

"My darling!" she said fondly.

That was all. No further questioning, no anxious probing, simply her love poured out in fullest measure upon the altar of friendship. And it moved Avery instantly and overwhelmingly, shattering her reserve, sweeping away the stony ramparts of her pride.

She turned and hid her face upon Mrs. Lorimer's breast in an anguish of tears.

It lasted for several minutes, that paroxysm of weeping. It was the pent misery of hours finding vent at last. All she had suffered, all the humiliation, the bitterness of desecrated love, the utter despair of her soul, was in those tears. They shook her being to the depths. They seemed to tear her heart asunder.

At last in broken whispers she began to speak. Still with those scalding tears falling between her words, she imparted the whole miserable story; she bared her fallen pride. There was no other person in the world to whom she could thus have revealed that inner agony, that lacerating shame. But Mrs. Lorimer, the despised, the down-trodden, was as an angel from heaven that day. A new strength was hers, born of her friend's utter need. She held her up, she sustained her, through that the darkest hour of her life, with a courage and a steadfastness of which no one had ever deemed her capable.

When Avery whispered at length: "I can never, never go back to him!" her answer was prompt.

"My dear, you must. It will be hard, God knows. But He will give you strength. Oh, Avery, don't act for yourself, dear! Let Him show the way!"

"If He will!" sobbed Avery, with her burning face hidden against her friend's heart.

"He will, dearest, He will," Mrs. Lorimer asserted with conviction. "He is much nearer to us in trouble than most of us ever realize. Only let Him take the helm; He will steer you through the storm."

"I feel too wicked," whispered Avery, "too—overwhelmed with evil."

"My dear, feelings are nothing," said the Vicar's wife with a decision that would have shocked the Reverend Stephen unspeakably. "We can't help our feelings, but we can put ourselves in the way of receiving help. Oh, don't you think He often lets us miss our footing just because He wants us to lean on Him?"

"I don't know," Avery said hopelessly. "But I think it will kill me to go back. Even if—if I pretended to forgive him—I couldn't possibly endure to—to go on as if nothing had happened. Eric—my first husband—will always stand between us now."

"Dear, are you sure that what you heard was not an exaggeration?" Mrs. Lorimer asked gently.

"Oh, yes, I am sure." There was utter hopelessness in Avery's reply. "I have always known that there was something in his past, some cloud of which he would never speak openly. But I never dreamed—never guessed——" She broke off with a sharp shudder. "Besides, he has offered no explanation, no excuse, no denial. He lets me believe the worst, and he doesn't care. He is utterly callous—utterly brutal. That is how I know that the worst is true." She rose abruptly, as if inaction had become torture to her. "Oh, I must leave him!" she cried out wildly. "I am nothing to him. My feelings are less than nothing. He doesn't really want me. Any woman could fill my place with him equally well!"

"Hush!" Mrs. Lorimer said. She went to Avery and held her tightly, as if she would herself do battle with the evil within. "You are not to say that, Avery. You are not to think it. It is utterly untrue. Suffering may have goaded him into brutality, but he is not wicked at heart.

And, my dear, he is in your hands now—to make or to mar. He worships you blindly, and if his worship has become an unholy thing, it is because the thought of losing you has driven him nearly distracted. You can win it back—if you will."

"I don't want to win it back!" Avery said. She suffered the arms about her, but she stood rigid in their embrace, unyielding, unresponding. "His love is horrible to me! I abhor it!"

"Avery! Your husband!"

"He is a murderer!" Avery cried passionately. "He would murder me too if—if he could bring himself to do without me! He hates me in his soul."

"Avery, hush! You are distraught. You don't know what you are saying." Mrs. Lorimer drew her back to her chair with tender insistence. "Sit down, darling! And try—do try—to be quiet for a little! You are worn out. I don't think you can have had any sleep."

"Sleep!" Avery almost laughed, and then again those burning, blinding tears rushed to her eyes. "Oh, you don't know what I've been through!" she sobbed. "You don't know! You don't know!"

"God knows, darling," whispered Mrs. Lorimer.

Minutes later, when Avery was lying back exhausted, no longer sobbing, only dumbly weeping, there came a gentle knock at the door.

Mrs. Lorimer went to it quickly, and met her eldest daughter upon the point of entering. Jeanie looked up at her enquiringly.

"Is anyone here?"

"Yes, dear. Avery is here. She isn't very well this morning. Run and fetch her a glass of milk!"

Jeanie hastened away. Mrs. Lorimer returned to Avery.

"My darling," she said, "do you know, I think I can see a way to help you."

Avery's eyes were closed. She put out a trembling hand. "You are very good to me."

"I wonder how often I have had reason to say that to you," said Mrs. Lorimer softly. "Listen, darling! You must go back. Yes, Avery, you must! You must! But—you shall take my little Jeanie with you."

Avery's eyes opened. Mrs. Lorimer was looking at her with tears in her own.

"I know I may trust her to you," she said. "But oh, you will take care of her! Remember how precious she is—and how fragile!"

"But, my dear—you couldn't spare her!" Avery said.

"Yes, I can—I will!" Mrs. Lorimer hastily rubbed her eyes and smiled—a resolute smile. "You may have her, dear. I know she will be happy with you. And Piers is so fond of her too. She will be a comfort to you—to you both, please God. She comforts everyone—my little Jeanie. It seems to be her rôle in life. Ah, here she comes! You shall tell her, dear. It will come better from you."

"May I come in?" said Jeanie at the door.

Her mother went to admit her. Avery sat up, and pushed her chair back against the window-curtain.

Jeanie entered, a glass of milk in one hand and a plate in the other. "Good morning, dear Avery!" she said, in her gentle, rather tired voice. "I've brought you a hot cake too—straight out of the oven. It smells quite good." She came to Avery's side, and stood within the circle of her arm; but she did not kiss her or look into her piteous, tear-stained face. "I hope you like currants," she said. "Baby Phil calls them flies. Have you seen Baby Phil lately? He has just cut another tooth. He likes everybody to look at it."

"I must see it presently," Avery said with an effort.

She drank the milk, and broke the cake, still holding Jeanie pressed to her side.

Jeanie, gravely practical, held the plate. "I saw Piers ride by a little while ago," she remarked. "He was on Pompey. But he was going so fast he didn't see me. He always rides fast, doesn't he? But I think Pompey likes it, don't you?"

"I don't know." There was an odd frozen note in Avery's voice. "He has to go—whether he likes it or not."

"But he is very fond of Piers," said Jeanie. "And so is Cæsar." She gave a little sigh. "Poor Mikey! Do you remember how angry he used to be when Cæsar ran by?"

Avery suppressed a shiver. Vivid as a picture flung on a screen, there rose in her brain the memory of that winter evening when Piers and Mike and Cæsar had all striven together for the mastery. Again she seemed to hear those savage, pitiless blows. She might have known! She might have known!

Sharply she wrenched herself back to the present. "Jeanie darling," she said, "your mother says that you may come and stay at the Abbey for a little while. Do you—would you—like to come?"

Her voice was unconsciously wistful. Jeanie turned for the first time and looked at her.

"Oh, Avery!" she said. "Stay with you and Piers?"

Her eyes were shining. She slid a gentle arm round Avery's neck.

"You would like to?" Avery asked, faintly smiling.

"I would love to," said Jeanie earnestly. She looked across at her mother. "Shall you be able to manage, dear?" she asked in her grown-up way.

Mrs. Lorimer stifled a sigh. "Oh yes, Jeanie dear. I shall do all right. Gracie will help with the little ones, you know."

Jeanie smiled at that. "I think I will go and talk to Gracie," she said, quietly releasing herself from Avery's arm.

But at the door she paused. "I hope father won't mind," she said. "But he did say I wasn't to have any more treats till my Easter holiday-task was finished."

"I will make that all right, dear," said Mrs. Lorimer.

"Thank you," said Jeanie. "Of course I can take it with me. I expect I shall get more time for learning it at the Abbey. You might tell him that, don't you think?"

"I will tell him, darling," said Mrs. Lorimer.

And Jeanie smiled and went her way.

CHAPTER IX

THE GREAT GULF

"HULLO!" said Piers. "Has the queen of all good fairies come to call?"

He strode across the garden with that high, arrogant air of his as of one who challenges the world, and threw himself into the vacant chair by the tea-table at which his wife sat.

The blaze of colour that overspread her pale face at his coming faded as rapidly as it rose. She glanced at him momentarily, under fluttering lids.

"Jeanie has come to stay," she said, her voice very low.

His arm was already round Jeanie, who had risen to meet him. He pulled her down upon his knee.

"That is very gracious of her," he said. "Good heavens, child! You are as light as a feather! Why don't you eat more?"

"I am never hungry," explained Jeanie. She kissed him and then drew herself gently from him, sitting down by his side with innate dignity. "Have you been riding all day?" she asked. "Isn't Pompey tired?"

"Cæsar and Pompey are both dead beat," said Piers. "And I"—he looked deliberately at Avery—"am as fresh as when I started."

Again, as it were in response to that look, her eyelids fluttered; but she did not raise them. Again the colour started and died in her cheeks.

"Have you had anything to eat?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Piers.

He took the cup she offered him, and drained it. There was a fitful gleam in his dark eyes as of a red, smouldering fire.

But Jeanie's soft voice intervening dispelled it. "How very hungry you must be!" she said in a motherly tone. "Will bread and butter and cake be enough for you?"

"Quite enough," said Piers. "Like you, Jeanie, I am not hungry." He handed back his cup to be filled again. "But I have a lively thirst," he said.

"It has been so hot to-day," observed Avery.

"It is never too hot for me," he rejoined. "Hullo! Who's that?"

He was staring towards the house under frowning brows. A figure had just emerged upon the terrace.

"Doctor Tudor!" said Jeanie.

Again Piers' eyes turned upon his wife. He looked at her with a sombre scrutiny. After a moment she lifted her own and resolutely returned the look.

"Won't you go and meet him?" she said.

He rose abruptly, and strode away.

Avery's eyes followed him, watching narrowly as the two men met. Lennox Tudor, she saw, offered his hand, and after the briefest pause, Piers took it. They came back slowly side by side.

Again, unobtrusively, Jeanie rose. Tudor caught sight of her almost before he saw Avery.

"Hullo!" he said. "What are you doing here?"

Jeanie explained with her customary old-fashioned air of responsibility: "I have come to take care of Avery, as she isn't very well."

Tudor's eyes passed instantly and very swiftly to Avery's face. He bent slightly over the hand she gave him.

"A good idea!" he said brusquely. "I hope you will take care of each other."

He joined them at the tea-table, and talked of indifferent things. Piers talked also with that species of almost fierce gaiety with which Avery had become so well acquainted of late. She was relieved that there was no trace of hostility apparent in his manner.

But, notwithstanding this fact, she received a shock of surprise when at the end of a quarter of an hour he got up with a careless: "Come along, my queen! We'll see if Pompey has got the supper he deserves."

Even Tudor looked momentarily astonished, but as he watched Piers saunter away with his arm round Jeanie's thin shoulders his expression changed. He turned to her abruptly. "How are you feeling to-day?" he enquired. "I had to come in and ask."

"It was very kind of you," she answered.

He smiled in his rather grim fashion. "I came more for my own satisfaction than for yours," he observed. "You are better, are you?"

She smiled also. "There is nothing the matter with me, you know."

He gave her a shrewd look through his glasses. "No," he said. "I know."

He said no more at all about her health, nor did he touch upon any other intimate subject, but she had a very distinct impression that he did not cease to observe her closely throughout their desultory conversation. She even tried to divert his attention, but she knew she did not succeed.

He remained with her until they saw Piers and Jeanie returning, and then somewhat suddenly he took his leave. He joined the two on the lawn, sent Jeanie back to her, and walked away himself with his host.

What passed between them she did not know and could not even conjecture, for she did not see Piers again till they met in the hall before dinner. Jeanie was with her, looking delicately pretty in her white muslin frock, and it was to her that Piers addressed himself.

"Come here, my queen! I want to look at you."

She went to him readily enough. He took her by the shoulders.

"Are you made of air, I wonder? I should be ashamed of you, Jeanie, if you belonged to me."

Jeanie looked up into the handsome, olive face with eyes that smiled love upon him. "I expect it's partly because you are so big and strong," she said.

"No, it isn't," said Piers. "It's because you're so small and weak. Avery will have to take you away to the sea again—what? You'd like that."

"And you too!" said Jeanie.

"I? Oh no; you wouldn't want me. Would you, Avery?"

He deliberately addressed her for the first time that day. Over the child's head his eyes flashed their mocking message. She felt as if he had struck her across the face.

"Would you?" he repeated, with arrogant insistence.

She tried to turn the question aside. "Well, as we are not going——"

"But you are going," he said. "You and Jeanie. How soon can you start? To-morrow?"

Avery looked at him in astonishment. "Are you in earnest?"

"Of course I'm in earnest," he said, with a frown that was oddly boyish. "You had better go to Stanbury Cliffs. It suited you all right in the spring. Fix it up with Mrs. Lorimer first thing in the morning, and go down in the afternoon!"

He spoke impatiently. Opposition or delay always set him chafing.

Jeanie looked at him with wonder in her eyes. "But you, Piers!" she said. "What will you do?"

"I? Oh, I shall be busy," he said. "I've got a lot on hand just now. Besides"—again the gibing note was in his voice—"you'll get along much better without me. Avery says so."

"She didn't!" exclaimed Jeanie, with a sudden rare touch of indignation.

"All right. She didn't," laughed Piers. "My mistake!" He flicked the child's cheek teasingly, and then abruptly stooped and kissed it. "Don't be angry, Queen of the Fairies! It isn't worth it."

She slipped her arm round his neck on the instant. "I'm not, dear Piers. I'm not angry. But we shouldn't want to go away and leave you alone. We shouldn't really."

He laughed again, carelessly, without effort. "No, but you'd get on all right without me. You and Avery are such pals. What do you say to it, Avery? Isn't it a good idea?"

"I think perhaps it is," she said slowly, her voice very low.

He straightened himself and looked at her, and again that vivid, painful blush covered her face and neck as though a flame had scorched her. She did not meet his eyes.

"Very well, then. It's settled," he said jauntily. "Now let's go and have some dinner!"

He kept up his light attitude throughout the meal, save that once he raised his wineglass mockingly to the woman on the wall. But his mood was elusive. Avery felt it. It was as if he played a juggling game on the edge of the pit of destruction, and she watched him with a leaden heart.

She rose from the table earlier than usual, for the atmosphere of the dining-room oppressed her almost unbearably. It was a night of heavy stillness.

"You ought to go to bed, dear," she said to Jeanie.

"Oh, must I?" said Jeanie wistfully. "I never sleep much on these hot nights. One can't breathe so well lying down."

Avery looked at her with quick anxiety, but she had turned to Piers and was leaning against him with a gentle, coaxing air.

"Please, dear Piers, would it tire you to play to us?" she begged.

He looked down at her for a moment as if he would refuse; then very gently he laid his hand on her head, pressing back the heavy, clustering hair from her forehead to look into her soft eyes.

"What do you want me to play?" he said.

She made a wide gesture of the hands and let them fall. "Something big," she said. "Something to take to bed with us and give us happy dreams."

His lips—those mobile, sensitive lips—curved in a smile that made Avery avert her eyes with a sudden hot pang. He released Jeanie, and turned away to the door.

"I'll see what I can do," he said. "You had better go into the garden—you and Avery."

They went, though Jeanie looked as if she would have preferred to accompany him to the music-room. It was little cooler on the terrace than in the house. The heat brooded over all, dense, black, threatening.

"I hope it will rain soon," said Jeanie, drawing her chair close to Avery's.

"There will be a storm when it does," Avery said.

"I like storms, don't you?" said Jeanie.

Avery shook her head. "No, dear."

She was listening in tense expectancy, waiting with a dread that was almost insupportable for the music that Piers was about to make. They were close to the open French window of the music-room, but there was no light within. Piers was evidently sitting there silent in the darkness. Her pulses were beating violently. Why did he sit so still? Why was there no sound?

A flash of lightning quivered above the tree-tops and was gone. Jeanie drew in her breath, saying no word. Avery shrank and closed her eyes. She could hear her heart beating audibly, like the throbbing of a distant drum. The suspense was terrible.

There came from far away the growl and mutter of the rising storm. The leaves of the garden began to tremble. And then, ere that roll of distant thunder had died away, another sound came through the darkness—a sound that was almost terrifying in its suddenness, and the grand piano began to speak.

What music it uttered Avery knew not. It was such as she had never heard before. It was unearthly, it was devilish, a fiendish chorus that was like the laughter of a thousand demons—a pandemonium that shocked her unutterably.

Just as once he had drawn aside for her the veil that shrouded the Holy Place, so now he rent open the gates of

hell and showed her the horrors of the prison-house, forcing her to look upon them, forcing her to understand.

She clung to Jeanie's hand in nightmare fear. The anguish of the revelation was almost unendurable. She felt as if he had caught her quivering soul and was thrusting it into an inferno from which it could never rise again. Through and above that awful laughter she seemed to hear the crackling of the flames, to feel the blistering heat that had consumed so many, to see the red glare of the furnace gaping wide before her.

She cried out without knowing it, and covered her face. "O God," she prayed wildly, "save us from this! Save us! Save us!"

The man at the piano could not have heard her cry. Of that she was certain. But their souls were in more subtle communion than any established by bodily word or touch. He must have known, have fathomed her anguish. For quite suddenly, as if a restraining hand had been laid upon him, he checked that dread torrent of sound. A few bitter chords, a few stray notes that somehow spoke to her of a spirit escaped and wandering alone and naked in a desert of indescribable emptiness, and then silence—a crushing, fearful silence like the ashes of a burned-out fire.

"And in hell he lift up his eyes . . ." Why did those words flash through her brain as though a voice had uttered them? She bowed her head lower, lower, barely conscious of Jeanie's enfolding arms. She was as one in the presence of a vision, hearing words that were spoken to her alone.

"And in hell he lift up his eyes being in torments . . ."

She waited quivering. Surely there was more to come. She listened for it even while she shrank in every nerve.

It came at length, slowly, heavily, like a death-sentence uttered within her. "Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence."

The words were spoken, the vision passed. Avery sat huddled in her chair as one stricken to the earth, wrapped in a trance of dread foreboding from which Jeanie was powerless to rouse her.

The lightning flashed again, and the thunder crashed above them like the clanging of brazen gates. From the

room behind them came the sound of a man's laugh, but it was a laugh that chilled her to the soul.

Again there came the sound of the piano—a tremendous chord, then a slow-swelling volume of harmony, a muffled burst of music like the coming of a great procession still far away.

Avery sprang upright as one galvanised into action by an electric force. "I cannot bear it!" she cried aloud. "I cannot bear it!"

She almost thrust Jeanie from her. "Oh, go, child, go! Tell him—tell him——" Her voice broke, went into a gasping utterance more painful than speech, finally dropped into hysterical sobbing.

Jeanie sprang into the dark room with a cry of: "Piers, oh, Piers!" and the music stopped, went out utterly as flame extinguished in water.

"What's the matter?" said Piers.

His voice sounded oddly defiant, almost savage. But Jeanie was too precipitate to notice it.

"Oh, please, will you go to Avery?" she begged breathlessly. "I think she is frightened at the storm."

Piers left the piano with a single, lithe movement that carried him to the window in a second. He passed Jeanie and was out on the terrace almost in one bound.

He discerned Avery on the instant, as she discerned him. A vivid flash of lightning lit them both, lit the whole scene, turned the night into sudden, glaring day. Before the thunder crashed above them he had caught her to him. They stood locked in the darkness while the great reverberations rolled over their heads, and as he held her he felt the wild beating of her heart against his own.

She had not resisted him, she did not resist him. She even convulsively clung to him. But her whole body was tense against his, tense and quivering like a stretched wire.

As the last of the thunder died, she raised her head and spoke:

"Piers, haven't you tortured me enough?"

He did not speak in answer. Only she heard his breath indrawn sharply, as though he checked some headlong word or impulse.

She stifled a great sob that took her unawares, and even as she did so she felt his arms slacken. He set her free.

"There is nothing to be afraid of," he said. "Better come indoors before the rain begins."

They went within, Jeanie pressing close to Avery in tender solicitude.

They turned on the lights, but throughout the frightful storm that followed, Piers leaned against the window-frame sombrely watching.

Avery sat on a sofa with Jeanie, her throbbing head leaning against the cushions, her eyes closed.

Nearly half an hour passed thus, then the storm rolled sullenly away; and at last Piers turned.

As though his look pierced her, Avery's eyes opened. She looked back at him, white as death, waiting for him to speak.

"Hadn't you better send Jeanie to bed?" he said.

Jeanie rose obediently. "Good night, dear Avery."

Avery sat up. Her hand was pressed hard upon her heart. "I am coming with you," she said.

Piers crossed the room to the door. He held it open for them.

Jeanie lifted her face for his kiss. An unaccustomed shyness seemed to have descended upon her. "Good night," she whispered.

He bent to her. "Good night, Jeanie!"

Her arms were round his neck in a moment. "Piers, thank you for your music, but—but——"

"Good night, dear!" said Piers again gently, but with obvious decision.

"Good night!" said Jeanie at once.

She would have passed out instantly, but Avery paused, detaining her.

Her eyes were raised steadily to her husband's face. "I will say good night, too," she said. "I am spending the night with Jeanie. She is not used to sleeping alone, and—the storm may come back."

She was white to the lips as she said it. She looked as if she would faint.

"Oh, but," began Jeanie, "I don't mind really. I——"

With a brief, imperious gesture Piers silenced her for the second time. He looked over her head, straight into Avery's eyes for a long, long second.

Then: "So be it!" he said, and with ironical ceremony he bowed her out.

CHAPTER X

SANCTUARY

"HULLO, sonny! You!"

Edmund Crowther turned from his littered writing-table, and rose to greet his visitor with a ready smile of welcome.

"Hullo!" said Piers. "How are you getting on? I was in town and thought I'd look you up. By Jove, though, you're busy! I'd better not stay."

"Sit down!" said Crowther.

He took him by the shoulders with kindly force and made him sit in his easy-chair. "I'm never too busy to be pleased to see you, Piers," he said.

"Very decent of you," said Piers.

He spoke with a short laugh, but his dark eyes roved round restlessly. There was no pleasure in his look.

The light from Crowther's unshaded lamp flared full upon him. In his faultless evening dress he looked every inch an aristocrat. That air of the old-Roman patrician was very strong upon him that night. But there was something behind it that Crowther was quick to note, something that reminded him vividly of an evening months before when he had fought hand to hand with the Evesham devil and had with difficulty prevailed.

He pushed his work to one side and foraged in his cupboard for drinks.

Piers watched him with an odd, half-scoffing smile about his lips. "Do you never drink when you are by yourself?" he asked.

"Not when I'm working," said Crowther.

"I see! Work is sacred—what?"

Crowther looked at him. The mockery of the tone had been scarcely veiled; but there was no consciousness of the fact in Crowther's quiet reply: "Yes; just that, sonny."

Piers laughed again, a bitter, gibing laugh. "I suppose it's more to you than your own soul—or anyone else's," he said.

Crowther paused in the act of pouring out. "Now what do you mean?" he said.

His eyes, direct and level, looked full at Piers. They held no anger, no indignation, only calm enquiry.

Piers faced the look with open mockery. "I mean, my good friend," he said, "that if I asked you to chuck it all and go round the world with me—you'd see me damned first."

Crowther's eyes dropped gravely to the job in hand. "Say when!" he said.

Piers made a restless movement. "Oh, that's enough! Strong drink is not my weakness. Why don't you answer my question?"

"I didn't know you asked one," said Crowther.

He set the tumbler in front of Piers and began to help himself.

Piers watched him for a couple of seconds longer, then leaped impulsively to his feet. "Oh, I'm going!" he said. "I was a fool to come!"

Crowther set down the decanter and straightened himself. He did not seem to move quickly, but he was at the door before Piers reached it.

He stood massively before him, blocking the way. "You've behaved foolishly a good many times in your life, my lad," he said. "But I shouldn't call you a fool. Why do you want me to go round the world with you? Tell me that!"

His tone was mild, but there was a certain grimness about him notwithstanding. He looked at Piers with a faint smile in his eyes that had in it a quality of resolution that made itself felt. Piers stood still before him, half chafing, half subdued.

"Tell me!" Crowther said again.

"Oh, what's the good?" With a defiance that was openly reckless Piers flung the question. "I see I've applied in the wrong quarter. Let me go!"

"I will not," Crowther said. Deliberately he raised a hand and pointed to the chair from which Piers had just sprung. "Sit down again, sonny, and we'll talk."

Piers swung round with an impatient gesture and went to the window. He threw it wide, and the distant roar of traffic filled the quiet room like the breaking of the sea.

After a distinct pause Crowther followed him. They stood together gazing out over the dim wilderness of many roofs and chimneys to where the crude glare of an advertisement lit up the night sky.

Piers was absolutely motionless, but there was a species of violence in his very stillness, as of a trapped animal preparing to make a wild rush for freedom. His attitude was feverishly tense.

Suddenly and very quietly Crowther's hand came forth and linked itself in his arm. "What is it, lad?" he said.

Piers made a jerky movement as if to avoid the touch, but the hand closed slowly and steadily upon him. He turned abruptly and met Crowther's eyes.

"Crowther," he said, "I've behaved like a cur. I—broke that promise I made to you."

He ground out the words savagely, between clenched teeth. Yet his look was defiant still. He held himself as a man defying shame.

Crowther's eyes never varied. They looked straight back with a wide kindliness greater than compassion, wholly devoid of reproach.

"All right, Piers," he said simply.

Piers stared at him for a moment as one in blank amazement, then very strangely his face altered. The hardness went from it like a mask suddenly rent away. He made an inarticulate sound and turned from the open window.

A second later he was sunk in Crowther's chair with his head in his hands, sobbing convulsively, painfully, uncontrollably, in an agony that tore like a living thing at the very foundations of his being.

A smaller man than Crowther might have been at a loss to deal with such distress, but Crowther was ready. He had seen men in extremities of suffering before. He knew how to ease a crushing burden. He sat down on the arm of the chair and thrust a strong hand over Piers' shoulder, saying no word.

Minutes passed ere by sheer violence that bitter anguish wore itself out at last. There came a long, piteous silence, then Piers' hand feeling blindly upwards. Crowther's grip encompassed it like a band of iron, but still for a space no word was spoken.

Then haltingly Piers found his voice: "I'm sorry—beastly

sorry—to have made such an ass of myself. You're jolly decent to me, Crowther."

To which Crowther made reply with a tenderness as simple as his own soul. "You're just a son to me, lad."

"A precious poor specimen!" muttered Piers.

He remained bowed for a while longer, then lifted at length a face of awful whiteness and leaned back upon Crowther's arm, still fast holding to his hand.

"You know, you're such an awfully good chap," he said, "that one gets into the way of taking you for granted. But I won't encroach on your goodness much longer. You're busy—what?" He smiled a quivering smile, and glanced momentarily towards the littered table.

"It will keep," said Crowther quietly.

"No, it won't. Life isn't long enough. On my soul, do you know it's like coming into sanctuary to enter a place like this? I feel as if I'd shut my own particular devil on the other side of the door. But he'll wait for me all right. We shan't lose each other on that account."

He uttered a laugh that testified more to the utter weariness of his soul than its bitterness.

"Where are you staying?" said Crowther.

"At Marchmont's. At least, I've got a room there. I haven't any definite plans at present."

"Unless you go round the world with me," said Crowther.

Piers' eyes travelled upwards sharply. "No, old chap. I didn't mean it. I wouldn't have you if you'd come. It was only a try-on, that."

"Some try-ons fit," said Crowther gravely. He turned towards the table, and reached for the drink he had prepared for Piers. "Look here, sonny! Have a drink?"

Piers drank in silence, Crowther steadily watching.

"You would have to be back by March," he said presently.

"What?" said Piers.

It was like a protest, the involuntary startled outcry of the patient under the probe. Crowther's hand grasped his more closely. "I'll go with you on that understanding, Piers," he said. "You'll be wanted then."

Piers groaned. "If it hadn't been for—that," he said, "I'd have ended the whole business with a bullet before now."

"No, you wouldn't," said Crowther quietly. "You don't

know yourself, boy, when you talk like that. You've given up Parliament for the present?"

"For good," said Piers. He paused, as if bracing himself for a great effort. "I went to Colonel Rose yesterday and told him I must withdraw. He had heard the rumours of course, but he advised me to hold on. I told him—I told him"—Piers stopped and swallowed hard, then forced himself on—"I told him there was truth in it, and then—he let me go."

There fell a painful silence, broken by Crowther: "How did this rumour get about?"

"Oh, that was at Ina Rose's wedding." Piers' words came more freely now, as if the obstruction were passed. "A cousin of Guyes', the bridegroom, was there. He came from Queensland, had been present that night when I fought and killed Denys, and he recognized me. Then—he got tight and told everybody who would listen. It was rotten luck, but it had to happen." He paused momentarily; then: "I wasn't enjoying myself, Crowther, before it happened," he said.

"I saw that, sonny." Crowther's arm pressed his shoulder in sympathy. It was characteristic of the man to display understanding rather than pity. He stood ever on the same level with his friends, however low that level might be.

Again Piers looked at him as if puzzled by his attitude. "You've done me a lot of good," he said abruptly. "You've made me see myself as you don't see me, dear old fellow, and never would. Well, I'm going. Thanks awfully!"

He made as if he would rise, but Crowther restrained him. "No, lad. I'm not parting with you for to-night. We'll send round for your traps. I'll put you up."

"What? No, no, you can't; I shall be all right. Don't worry about me!"

Piers began to make impulsive resistance, but Crowther's hold only tightened.

"I'm not parting with you to-night," he reiterated firmly. "And look here, boy! You've come to me for help, and, to the best of my ability, I'll help you. But first—are you sure you are justified in leaving home? Are you sure you are not wanted?"

"Wanted! I!" Piers looked at him from under eyelids

that quivered a little. "Yes," he said after a moment, with a deliberation that sounded tragically final, "I am quite sure of that, Crowther."

Crowther asked no more. He patted Piers' shoulder gently and rose.

"Very well," he said. "I'll take that six months' trip round the world with you."

"But you can't!" protested Piers. "I never seriously thought you could! I only came to you because—" he halted, and a slow, deep flush mounted to his forehead—"because you've saved me before," he said. "And I was so—so horribly near—the edge of the pit this time."

He spoke with unconscious wistfulness, and Crowther's lips relaxed in a smile that had in it something of a maternal quality. "So long as I can help you, you can count on me," he said.

"You're the only man in the world who can help me," Piers said impulsively. "At least"—he smiled himself—"I couldn't take it from anyone else. But I'm not taking this from you, Crowther. You've got your own pet job on hand, and I'm not going to hinder it."

Crowther was setting his writing-table in order. He did not speak for a few seconds. Then: "I am a man under authority, sonny," he said. "My own pet job, as you call it, doesn't count if it isn't what's wanted of me. It has waited twenty-five years; it'll keep—easy—for another six months."

Piers got up. "I'm a selfish brute if I let you," he said irresolutely.

"You can't help yourself, my son." Crowther turned calm eyes upon him. "And now just sit down here and write a line home to say what you are going to do!"

He had cleared a space upon the table; he pulled forward a chair.

"Oh, I can't! I can't!" said Piers quickly.

But Crowther's hand was on his shoulder. He pressed him down. "Do it, lad! It's got to be done," he said.

And with a docility that sat curiously upon him, Piers submitted. He leaned his head on his hand, and wrote.

CHAPTER XI

THE FALLING NIGHT

"YOU ought to rest, you know," said Tudor. "This sort of thing is downright madness for you."

They were walking together in the February twilight along the long, dark avenue of chestnuts that led to Rodding Abbey. Avery moved with lagging feet that she strove vainly to force to briskness.

"I don't think I do too much," she said. "It isn't good for me to be idle. It makes me—it makes me mope."

The involuntary falter in the words spoke more eloquently than the words themselves, but she went on after a moment with that same forced briskness to which she was trying to compel her dragging limbs. "I only ran down to the Vicarage after lunch because it is Jeanie's birthday. It is no distance across the park. It seemed absurd to go in state."

"You are not wise," said Tudor, in a tone that silenced all argument.

Avery gave a little sigh and turned from the subject. "I thought Jeanie looking very fragile. Mrs. Lorimer has promised that she may come to me again just as soon as I am able to have her."

"Ah! Jeanie is a comfort to you?" said Tudor.

To which she answered with a catch in her breath: "The greatest comfort."

They reached the great grey house and entered. A letter lay on the table by the door. Avery took it up with a sharp shiver.

"From Piers?" asked Tudor abruptly.

She bent her head. "He writes—almost every week."

"When is he coming home?" He uttered the question with a directness that sounded almost brutal, but Avery caught the note of anxiety behind it and understood.

She opened the letter in silence, and read it by the waning light of the open door. The crackling of the fire behind her was the only sound within. Without, the wind moaned desolately through the bare trees. It was going to rain.

Slowly Avery raised her head at last and gazed out into the gathering dark.

"Come inside!" said Tudor peremptorily.

His hand closed upon her arm, he almost compelled her. "How painfully thin you are!" he said, as she yielded. "Are you starving yourself of food as well as rest?"

Again she did not answer him. Her eyes were fixed, unseeing. They focussed their gaze upon the fire as he led her to it. She sat down in the chair he placed for her, and then very suddenly she began to shiver as if with an ague.

"Don't!" said Tudor sharply.

He bent over her, his hands upon her shoulders, holding her.

She controlled herself, and leaned back. "Do sit down, Doctor! I'm afraid I'm very rude—very forgetful. Will you ring for tea? Piers is in town. He writes very kindly, very—very considerately. He is only just back from Egypt—he and Mr. Crowther. The last letter was from Cairo. Would you—do you care to see what he says?"

She offered him the letter with the words, and after the faintest hesitation Tudor took it.

"I have come back to be near you," so without preliminary the letter ran. "You will not want me, I know, but still—I am here. For heaven's sake, take care of yourself and have anything under the sun that you need.

"Your husband,

"PIERS."

It only covered the first page. Tudor turned the sheet frowningly and replaced it in its envelope.

"He always writes like that," said Avery. "Every week—all through the winter—just a sentence or two. I haven't written at all to him, though I've tried—till I couldn't try any more."

She spoke with a weariness so utter that it seemed to swamp all feeling. Tudor turned his frowning regard upon her. His eyes behind their glasses intently searched her face.

"How does he get news of you?" he asked abruptly.

"Through Mrs. Lorimer. She writes to him regularly, I believe—either she or Jeanie. I suppose—presently——"

Avery stopped, her eyes upon the fire, her hands tightly clasped before her.

"Presently?" said Tudor.

She turned her head slightly, without moving her eyes. "Presently there will have to be some—mutual arrangement made. But I can't see my way yet. I can't consider the future at all. I feel as if night were falling. Perhaps—for me—there is no future."

"May I take your pulse?" said Tudor.

She gave him her hand in the same tired fashion. He took it gravely, feeling her pulse, his eyes upon her face.

"Have you no relations of your own?" he asked her suddenly.

She shook her head. "No one near. My parents were both only children."

"And no friends?" he said.

"Only Mrs. Lorimer. I lost sight of people when I married. And then"—Avery halted momentarily—"after my baby girl died, for a long time I didn't seem to care for making new friends."

"Ah!" said Tudor, his tone unwontedly gentle. "You will soon have another child to care for now."

She made a slight gesture as of protest. "Do you know, I can't picture it. I do not feel that it will be so. I believe one of us—or both—will die."

She spoke calmly, so calmly that even Tudor, with all his experience, was momentarily shocked. "Avery!" he said sharply, "you are morbid!"

She looked at him then with her tired eyes. "Am I?" she said. "I really don't feel particularly sad—only worn out. When anyone has been burned—badly burned—it destroys the nerve tissues, doesn't it? They don't suffer after that has happened. I think that is my case."

"You will suffer," said Tudor.

He spoke brutally; he wanted to rouse her from her lethargy, to pierce somehow that dreadful calm.

But he failed; she only faintly smiled.

"I can bear bodily suffering," she said, "particularly if it leads to freedom and peace."

He got up as if it were he who had been pierced. "You won't die!" he said harshly. "I won't let you die!"

Her eyes went back to the fire, as if attracted thereto irresistibly. "Most of me died last August," she said in a low voice.

"You are wrong!" He stood over her almost threateningly. "When you hold your child in your arms you will see how wrong. Tell me, when is your husband coming back to you?"

That reached her. She looked up at him with a quick, hunted look. "Never!" she said.

He looked back at her mercilessly. "Never is a long time, Lady Evesham. Do you think he will be kept at arm's length when you are through your trouble? Do you think—whatever his sins—that he has no claim upon you? Mind, I don't like him. I never did and I never shall. But you—you are sworn to him."

He had never spoken so to her before. She flinched as if he had struck her with a whip. She put her hands over her face, saying no word.

He stood for a few moments stern, implacable, looking down at her. Then very suddenly his attitude changed. His face softened. He stooped and touched her shoulder.

"Avery!" His voice was low and vehement; he spoke into her ear. "When you first kicked him out, I was mean enough to feel glad. But I soon saw—that he took all that is vital in you with him. Avery—my dear—for God's sake—have him back!"

She did not speak or move, save for a spasmodic shuddering that shook her whole frame.

He bent lower. "Avery, I say, can't you—for the baby's sake—anyway, consider it?"

She flung out her hands with a cry. "The child is cursed! The child will die!" There was terrible conviction in the words. She lifted a tortured face. "Oh, don't you see," she said piteously, "how impossible it is for me? Don't—don't say any more!"

"I won't," said Tudor.

He took the outflung hands and held them closely, restrainingly, soothingly.

"I won't," he said again. "Forgive me for saying so much! Poor girl! Poor girl!"

His lips quivered a little as he said it, but his hold was full of sustaining strength. She grew gradually calmer

and finally submitted to the gentle pressure with which he laid her back in her chair.

"You are always so very good to me," she said presently. "I sometimes wonder how I ever came to—to——" She stopped herself abruptly.

"To refuse me?" said Tudor quietly. "I always knew why, Lady Evesham. It was because you loved another man. It has been the case for as long as I have known you."

He turned from her with the words, wholly without emotion, and took up his stand on the hearth-rug.

"Now may I talk to you about your health?" he said professionally.

She leaned forward slowly. "Doctor Tudor, first will you make me a promise?"

He smiled a little. "I don't think so. I never do make promises."

"Just this once!" she pleaded anxiously. "Because it means a great deal to me."

"Well?" said Tudor.

"It is only"—she paused a moment, breathing quickly—"only that you will not—whatever the circumstances—let Piers be sent for."

"I can't promise that," said Tudor at once.

She clasped her hands beseechingly. "You must—please—you must!"

He shook his head. "I can't. I will undertake that he shall not come to you against your will. I can't do more than that."

"Do you suppose you could keep him out?" Avery said, a note of quivering bitterness in her voice.

"I am quite sure I can," Tudor answered steadily. "Don't trouble yourself on that head! I swear that, unless you ask for him, he shall not come to you."

She shivered again and dropped back in her chair. "I shall never do that—never—never—so long as I am myself!"

"Your wishes—whatever they are—shall be obeyed," Tudor promised gravely.

And with that gently but very resolutely he changed the subject.

CHAPTER XII

THE DREAM

HOW many times had he paced up and down the terrace? Piers could not have said. He had been there for hours, years, half a lifetime, waiting—waiting eternally for the summons that never came.

Could it have been only that morning that Mrs. Lorimer's urgent telegram had reached him? Only that morning that he had parted from Crowther for the first time in six months? It seemed æons ago. And yet here he was in the cold grey dusk, still waiting to be called to his wife's side.

The night was fast approaching—a bitter, cheerless night with a driving wind that seemed to promise snow. It was growing darker every moment. Only her window shone like a beacon in the gloom. How long would he have to wait? How long? How long?

He had brought a doctor with him in obedience to Mrs. Lorimer's message, transmitting Tudor's desire. Tudor was not satisfied. He wanted Maxwell Wyndham, the great surgeon—a man still comparatively young in years but high in his profession—a man in whose presence—so it was said—no patient ever died. That of course was an exaggeration—some hysterical woman's tribute to his genius. But genius he undoubtedly possessed and that of a very high order.

If anyone could save her, it would be Maxwell Wyndham. So Piers told himself each time he turned in his endless pacing and looked at that lighted window. Tudor believed in him. And—yes, he believed in him also. There had been something in the great man's attitude, something of arrogant self-assurance that had inspired him with confidence almost against his will. He had watched him saunter up the stairs with his hands thrust into his pockets and an air of limitless leisure pervading his every movement, and he had been exasperated by the man's deliberation and subtly comforted at the same time. He was thankful that he had been able to secure him.

Ah, what was that? A cry in the night! The weird, haunting screech of an owl! He ridiculed himself for the sudden wild thumping of his heart. But would they never call him? This suspense was tearing at the very roots of his being.

Away in the distance a dog was barking, fitfully, peevishly—the bark of a chained animal. Piers stopped in his walk and cursed the man who had chained him. Then—as though driven by an invisible goad—he pressed on, walking resolutely with his back turned upon the lighted window, forcing himself to pace the whole length of the terrace.

He had nearly reached the further end when a sudden fragrance swept across his path—pure, intoxicating, exquisitely sweet. Violets! The violets that grew in the great bed under the study-window! The violets that Sir Beverley's bride had planted fifty years ago!

The thought of his grandfather went through him like a stab through the heart. He clenched his hands and held his breath while the spasm passed. Never since the night Victor had summoned Avery to comfort him had he felt so sick a longing for the old man's presence. For a few lingering seconds it was almost more than he could bear. Then he turned about and faced the chill night wind and that lighted window, and the anguish of his vigil drove out all other griefs. How long had he yet to wait? How long? How long?

There came a low call behind him on the terrace. He wheeled, strangling a startled exclamation in his throat. A man's figure—a broad, powerful figure—lounged towards him. He seemed to be wearing carpet slippers, for he made no sound. It was Maxwell Wyndham, and Piers' heart ceased to beat. He stood as if turned to stone. All the blood in his body seemed to be singing in his ears. His head was burning, the rest of him cold—cold as ice. He would have moved to meet the advancing figure, but he could not stir. He could only stop and listen to that maddening tarantella beating out in his fevered brain.

"I say, you know"—the voice came to him out of an immensity of space, as though uttered from another world—"it's a bit too chilly for this sort of thing. Why didn't you put on an overcoat?"

A man's hand, strong and purposeful, closed upon his arm and impelled him towards the house.

Piers went like an automaton, but he could not utter a word. His mouth felt parched, his tongue powerless.

Avery! Avery! The woman he had wronged—the woman he worshipped so madly—for whom his whole being, mental and physical, craved desperately, yearning unceasingly—without whom he lived in a torture that was never dormant! Avery! Avery! Was she lying dead behind that lighted window? If so, if so, those six months of torment had been in vain. He would end his misery swiftly and finally before it turned his brain.

Maxwell Wyndham was guiding him towards the conservatory, where a dim light shone. It was like an altar-flame in the darkness—that place where first their lips had met. The memory of that night went through him like a sword-thrust. Oh, Avery! Oh, Avery!

"Now, look here," said Maxwell Wyndham, in his steady, emotionless voice; "you're wanted upstairs, but you can't go unless you are absolutely sure of yourself."

Wanted! His senses leaped to the word. Instinctively he pulled himself together, collecting all his strength. He spoke, and found to his surprise that speech was not difficult.

"She has asked for me?"

"Yes; but"—Wyndham's tone was impressive—"I warn you, she is not altogether herself. And—she is very desperately ill."

"The child?" questioned Piers.

"The child never breathed." Curt and cold came the answer. "I have had to concentrate all my energies upon saving the mother's life, and—to be open with you—I don't think I have succeeded. There is still a chance, but——" He left the sentence unfinished.

They had reached the conservatory, and, entering, it was Piers who led the way. His face, as they emerged into the library, was deathly, but he was absolute master of himself.

"I believe there is a meal in the dining-room," he said. "Will you help yourself while I go up?"

"No," said Wyndham briefly. "I am coming up with you."

He kept a hand upon Piers' arm all the way up the stairs, deliberately restraining him, curbing the fevered impetuosity

that urged him with a grim insistence that would not yield an inch to any chafing for freedom.

He gave utterance to no further injunctions, but his manner was eloquent of the urgent need for self-repression. When Piers entered his wife's room, that room which he had not entered since the night of Ina's wedding, his tread was catlike in its caution, and all the eagerness was gone from his face.

Then only did the doctor's hand fall from him, so that he advanced alone.

She was lying on one side of the great four-poster, straight and motionless as a recumbent figure on a tomb. Her head was in deep shadow. He could see her face only in vaguest outline.

Softly he approached, and Mrs. Lorimer, rising silently from a chair by the bedside, made room for him. He sat down, sinking as it were into a great abyss of silence, listening tensely, but hearing not so much as a breath.

The doctor took up his stand at the foot of the bed. In the adjoining room sat Lennox Tudor, watching ceaselessly, expectantly, it seemed to Piers. Behind him moved a nurse, noiselessly intent upon polishing something that flashed like silver every time it caught his eye.

Suddenly out of the silence there came a voice. "If I go down to hell—Thou art there also. If I take the wings of the morning—the wings of the morning"—There came a pause, the difficult pause of uncertainty—"The wings of the morning——" murmured the voice again.

Piers leaned upon the pillow. "Avery!" he said.

She turned as if some magic moved her. Her hands came out to him, piteously weak and trembling. "Piers—my darling!" she said.

He gathered the poor nerveless hands into a tight clasp, kissing them passionately. He forgot the silent watcher at the foot of the bed, forgot little Mrs. Lorimer hovering in the shadows, and Tudor waiting with the nurse behind him. They all slipped into nothingness, and Avery—his wife—alone remained in a world that was very dark.

Her voice came to him in a weak whisper. "Oh, Piers, I've been—wanting you so!"

"My own darling!" he whispered back. "I will never leave you again!"

"Oh yes, you will!" she answered drearily. "You always say that, but you are always gone in the morning. It's only a dream—only a dream!"

He slipped his arms beneath her and drew her to his breast. "It is not a dream, Avery," he told her very earnestly. "I am here in the flesh. I am holding you."

"I know," she said. "It's always so."

The weary conviction of her tone smote cold to his heart. He gathered her closer still. He pressed his lips to her forehead.

"Avery, can't you feel me?" he said

Her head sank against his shoulder. "Yes—yes," she said. "But you have always done that."

"Done what, darling?"

"Imposed your will on mine—made me feel you." Her voice quivered; she began to cry a little, weakly, like a tired child. "Do you remember—what you said—about—about—the ticket-of-leave?" she said. "You leave your dungeon—my poor Piers. But you have to go back again—when the leave has expired. And I—I am left alone."

The tears were running down her face. He wiped them tenderly away.

"My dearest, if you want me—if you need me—I will stay," he said.

"But you can't," she said hopelessly. "Even to-night—even to-night—I thought you were never coming. And I went at last to look for you—behind your iron bars. But, oh, Piers, the agony of it! And I couldn't reach you after all, though I tried so hard—so hard."

"Never mind, my darling!" he whispered. "We are together now."

"But we shan't be when the morning comes," sobbed Avery. "I know it is all a dream. It's happened so many, many times."

He clasped her closer, hushing her with tender words, vowing he would never leave her, while the Shadow of Death gathered closer about them, threatening every instant to come between.

She grew calmer at last, and presently sank into a state of semi-consciousness, lying against his breast.

Time passed. Piers did not know how it went. With his wife clasped in his arms he sat and waited, waited—for

the falling of a deeper night or the coming of the day—he knew not which. His brain felt like a stopped watch; it did not seem to be working at all. Even the power to suffer seemed to have left him. He felt curiously indifferent, strangely submissive to circumstances—like a man scourged into the numbness of exhaustion. He knew at the back of his mind that as soon as his vitality reasserted itself the agony would return. The respite could not last, but while it lasted he knew no pain. Like one in a state of coma, he was not even aware of thought.

It might have been hours later, or possibly only minutes, that Maxwell Wyndham came round to his side and bent over him, a quiet hand on his shoulder.

"You had better lay her down," he said. "She won't wake now."

"What?" said Piers sharply.

The words had stabbed him back to understanding in a second. He glared at the doctor with eyes half-savage, half-frightened.

"No, no!" said Wyndham gently. "I don't mean that. She is asleep. She is breathing. But she will rest better if you lay her down."

The absolute calmness with which he spoke took effect upon Piers. He yielded, albeit not very willingly, to the mandate.

They laid her down upon the pillow between them, and then for many seconds Wyndham stood, closely watching, almost painfully intent. Piers waited dumbly, afraid to move, afraid to speak.

The doctor turned to him at last. "What about that meal you spoke of? Shall we go down and get it?"

Piers stared at him. "I am not leaving her," he said in a quick whisper.

Wyndham's hand was on his shoulder again—a steady, compelling hand. "Oh yes, you are. I want to talk to you," he said. "She is sleeping naturally, and she won't wake for some time. Come!"

There was nothing peremptory about him, yet he gained his end. Piers rose. He hung for a moment over the bed, gazing hungrily downwards upon the shadowy, motionless form, then in silence turned.

Tudor had risen. He met them in the doorway, and

between him and the London doctor a few words passed. Then the latter pushed his hand through Piers' arm, and drew him away.

They descended the wide oak stairs together and entered the dining-room. Piers moved like a man dazed. His companion went straight to the table and poured out a drink, which he immediately held out to Piers, looking at him with eyes that were green and very shrewd.

"I think we shall save her," he said.

Piers drank in great gulps, and came to himself. "I say, I'm beastly rude!" he said, with sudden boyishness. "For goodness sake, help yourself! Sit down, won't you?"

Maxwell Wyndham seated himself with characteristic deliberation of movement. He had fiery red hair that shone brazenly in the lamplight.

"I can't eat by myself, Sir Piers," he remarked, after a moment. "And it isn't particularly good for you to drink without eating either, in your present frame of mind."

Piers sat down, his attitude one of intense weariness. "You really think she'll pull through?" he said.

"I think so," Wyndham answered. "But it won't be a walk over. She will be ill for a long time."

"I'll take her away somewhere," said Piers. "A quiet time at the sea will soon pick her up."

Maxwell Wyndham said nothing.

Piers glanced at him with quick impatience. "Don't you advise that?"

The green eyes countered his like the turn of a sword-blade. "Certainly quiet is essential," said Wyndham enigmatically.

Piers made a chafing movement. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," very calmly came the answer, "that if you really value your wife's welfare, you will let someone else take her away."

It was a straight thrust, and it went home. Piers flinched sharply. But in a moment he had recovered himself. He was on guard. He looked at Wyndham with haughty enquiry.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because her peace of mind depends upon it." Wyndham's answer came with brutal directness. "You will find, when this phase of extreme weakness is past, that your

presence is not desired. She may try to hide it from you. That depends upon the kind of woman she is. But the fact will remain—does remain—that for some reason best known to yourself, she shrinks from you. I am not speaking rashly, without knowledge. When a woman is in agony she can't help showing her soul. I saw your wife's soul to-day."

Piers was white to the lips. He sat rigid, no longer looking at the doctor, but staring beyond him fixedly at a woman's face on the wall that smiled and softly mocked.

"What did she say to you?" he said, after a moment.

"She said," curtly Wyndham made reply—"it was at a time when she could hardly speak at all—'Even if I ask for my husband, don't send—don't send!'"

"Yet you fetched me!" Piers' eyes came swiftly back to him; they shone with a fierce glint.

But Wyndham was undismayed. "I fetched you to save her life," he said. "There was nothing else to be done. She was in delirium, and nothing else would calm her."

"And she wanted me!" said Piers. "She begged me to stay with her!"

"I know. It was a passing phase. When her brain is normal she will have forgotten."

Piers sprang to his feet with sudden violence. "But—damn it—she is my wife!" he cried out fiercely.

Maxwell Wyndham leaned across the table. "She is your wife—yes," he said. "But isn't that a reason for considering her to the very utmost? Have you always done that, I wonder? No, don't answer! I've no right to ask. Only—you know, doctors are the only men in the world who know just what women have to put up with, and the knowledge isn't exactly exhilarating. Give her a month or two to get over this! You won't be sorry afterwards."

It was kindly spoken, so kindly that the flare of anger died out of Piers on the instant, and the sweetness dormant in him—that latent sweetness that had won Avery's heart—came swiftly to the surface.

He threw himself down again, looking into the alert, green eyes with an oddly rueful smile. "All right, Doctor!" he said. "I shan't go to her if she doesn't want me. But I've got to make sure she doesn't, haven't I? What?"

There was a wholly unconscious note of pathos in the last word that sent the doctor's mouth up at one corner

in a smile that was more pitying than humorous "I should certainly do that," he said. "But I'm afraid you'll find I've told you the beastly truth."

"For which I am obliged to you," said Piers, with a bow.

CHAPTER XIII

THE HAND OF THE SCULPTOR

DURING the week that followed no second summons came to Piers from his wife's room. He hung about the house, aimless, sick at heart, with hope sinking ever lower within him like a fire dying for lack of replenishment.

He could neither sleep nor eat, and Victor watched him with piteous though unspoken solicitude. Victor knew the wild, undisciplined temperament of the boy he had cherished from his cradle, and he lived in hourly dread of some sudden passionate outburst of rebellion, some desperate act that should lead to irremediable disaster. He had not forgotten that locked drawer in the old master's bureau or the quick release it contained, and he never left Piers long alone in its vicinity.

But he need not have been afraid. Piers' thoughts never strayed in that direction. If his six months in Crowther's society had brought him no other comfort, they had at least infused in him a saner outlook and steadier balance. Very little had ever passed between them on the subject of the tragedy that had thrown them together. After the first bitter outpouring of his soul, Piers had withdrawn himself with so obvious a desire for privacy that Crowther had never attempted to cross the boundary thus clearly defined. But his influence had made itself felt notwithstanding. It would have been impossible to have lived with the man for so long without imbibing some of that essential greatness of soul that was his main characteristic, and Piers was ever swift to feel the effect of atmosphere. He had come to look upon Crowther with a reverence that in a fashion affected his daily life. That which Crowther regarded as unworthy he tossed aside himself without consideration. Crowther had not despised him at his worst, and he was determined that he would show himself to be not despicable. He was moreover under a solemn promise to return to Crowther when he

found himself at liberty, and in very gratitude to the man he meant to keep that promise.

But, albeit he was braced for endurance, the long hours of waiting were very hard to bear. His sole comfort lay in the fact that Avery was making gradual progress in the right direction. It was a slow and difficult recovery, as Maxwell Wyndham had foretold, but it was continuous. Tudor assured him of this every day with a curt kindliness that had grown on him of late. It was his own fashion of showing a wholly involuntary sympathy of which he was secretly half-ashamed, and which he well knew Piers would have brooked in no other form. It established an odd sort of truce between them of which each was aware the while he sternly ignored it. They could never be friends. It was fundamentally impossible, but at least they had, if only temporarily, ceased to be enemies.

Little Mrs. Lorimer's sympathy was also of a half-ashamed type. She did not want to be sorry for Piers, but she could not wholly restrain her pity. The look in his eyes haunted her. Curiously it made her think of some splendid animal created for liberty, and fretting its heart out in utter, hopeless misery on a chain.

She longed with all her motherly heart to comfort him, and by the irony of circumstance it fell to her to deal the final blow to what was left of his hope. She wondered afterwards how she ever brought herself to the task, but it was in reality so forced upon her that she could not evade it. Avery, lying awake during the first hours of a still night, heard her husband's feet pacing up and down the terrace, and the mischief was done. She was thrown into painful agitation and wholly lost her sleep in consequence. When Mrs. Lorimer arrived about noon on the following day, she found her alarmingly weak, and the nurse in evident perplexity.

"I am sure there is something worrying her," the latter said to Mrs. Lorimer. "I can't think what it is."

But directly Mrs. Lorimer was alone with Avery the trouble came out. For she reached out fevered hands to her, saying, "Why, oh, why did you persuade me to come back here? I knew he would come if I did!"

Again the emergency impelled Mrs. Lorimer to a display of common sense with which few would have credited her.

"Oh, do you mean Piers, dear?" she said. "But surely you are not afraid of him! He has been here all the time—ever since you were so ill."

"And I begged you not to send!" groaned Avery.

"My dear," said Mrs. Lorimer very gently, "it was his right to be here."

"Then that night—that night——" gasped Avery, "he really did come to me—that night after the baby was born."

"My darling, you begged for him so piteously," said Mrs. Lorimer apologetically.

Avery's lip quivered. "That was just what I feared—what I wanted to make impossible," she said. "When one is suffering, one forgets so."

"But surely it was the cry of your heart, darling," urged Mrs. Lorimer tremulously. "And do you know—poor lad!—he looks so ill, so miserable."

But Avery's face was turned away. "I can't help it," she said. "I can't—possibly—see him again. I feel as if—as if there were a curse upon us both, and that is why the baby died. Oh yes, morbid, I know; perhaps wrong. But—I have been steeped in sin. I must be free for a time. I can't face him yet. I haven't the strength."

"Dearest, he will never force himself upon you," said Mrs. Lorimer.

Avery's eyes went instinctively to the door that led into the room that Piers had occupied after his marriage. The broken bolt had been removed, but not replaced. A great shudder went through her. She covered her face with her hands.

"Oh, beg him—beg him to go away," she sobbed, "till I am strong enough to go myself!"

Argument was useless. Mrs. Lorimer abandoned it with the wisdom born of close friendship. Instead, she clasped Avery tenderly to her and gave herself to the task of calming her distress.

And when that was somewhat accomplished, she left her to go sadly in search of Piers.

She found him sitting on the terrace with the morning paper beside him and Cæsar pressed close to his legs, his great mottled head resting on his master's knee.

He was not reading. So much Mrs. Lorimer perceived before with a sharp turn of the head he discovered her.

He was on his feet in a moment, and she saw his smile for an instant, only for an instant, as he came to meet her. She noted with a pang how gaunt he looked and how deep were the shadows about his eyes. Then he had reached her, and was holding both her hands almost before she realized it.

"I say, you're awfully good to come up every day like this," he said. "I can't think how you make the time. Splendid sun to-day—what? It's like a day in summer, if you can get out of the wind. Come and bask with me!"

He drew her along the terrace to his sheltered corner, and made her sit down, spreading his newspaper on the stone seat for her accommodation. Her heart went out to him as he performed that small chivalrous act. She could not help it. And suddenly the task before her seemed so monstrous that she felt she could not fulfil it. The tears rushed to her eyes.

"What's the matter?" said Piers gently. He sat down beside her, and slipped an encouraging hand through her arm. "Was it something you came out to say? Don't mind me! You don't, do you?"

His voice was softly persuasive. He leaned towards her, his dark eyes searching her face. Mrs. Lorimer felt as if she were about to hurt a child.

She blew her nose, dried her eyes, and took the brown hand very tightly between her own. "My dear, I'm so sorry for you—so sorry for you both!" she said.

A curious little glint came and went in the eyes that watched her. Piers' fingers closed slowly upon hers.

"I've got to clear out—what?" he said.

She nodded mutely; she could not say it.

He was silent awhile; then: "All right," he said. "I'll go this afternoon."

His voice was dead level, wholly emotionless, but for a few seconds his grip taxed her endurance to the utmost. Then, abruptly, it relaxed.

He bent his black head and kissed the nervous little hands that were clasped upon his own.

"Don't you fret now!" he said, with an odd kindness that was to her more pathetic than any appeal for sympathy. "You've got enough burdens of your own to bear without shouldering ours. How is Jeanie?"

Mrs. Lorimer choked down a sob. "She isn't a bit well. She has a cold and such a racking cough. I'm keeping her in bed."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Piers steadily. "Give her my love! And look here, when Avery is well enough, let them go away together, will you? It will do them both good."

"It's dear of you to think of it," said Mrs. Lorimer wistfully. "Yes, it did do Jeanie good in the autumn. But Avery——"

"It will do Avery good too," he said. "She can take that cottage at Stanbury Cliffs for the whole summer if she likes. Tell her to! And look here! Will you take her a message from me?"

"A written message?" asked Mrs. Lorimer.

He pulled out a pocket-book. "Six words," he said.

He scrawled them, tore out the leaf and gave it to her, holding it up before her eyes that she might read it.

"Good-bye till you send for me. PIERS."

"That's all," he said. "Thanks awfully. She'll understand that. And now—I say, you're not going to cry any more, are you?" He shook his head at her with a laugh in his eyes. "You really mustn't. You're much too tender-hearted. I say, it was a pity about the baby—what? I thought the baby might have made a difference. But it'll be all the same presently. She's wanting me really. I've known that ever since that night—you know—ever since I held her in my arms."

He spoke with absolute simplicity. She had never liked him better than at that moment. His boyishness had utterly disarmed her, and not till later did she realise how completely he had masked his soul therewith.

She parted from him with a full heart, and had a strictly private little cry on his account ere she returned to Avery. Poor lad! Poor lad! And when he wasn't smiling, he did look so ill!

The same thought struck Crowther a few hours later as Piers sat with him in his room, and devoted himself with considerable adroitness to making his fire burn through as quickly as possible, the while he briefly informed him that

his wife was considered practically out of danger and had no further use for him for the present.

Crowther's heart sank at the news, though he gave no sign of dismay.

"What do you think of doing, sonny?" he asked, after a moment.

"I? Why, what is there for me to do?" Piers glanced round momentarily. "I wonder what you'd do, Crowther," he said, with a smile that was scarcely gay.

Crowther came to his side, and stood there massively, while he filled his pipe. "Piers," he said, "I presume she knows all there is to know of that bad business?"

Piers rammed the poker a little deeper into the fire and said nothing.

But Crowther had broken through the barricade of silence at last, and would not be denied.

"Does she know, Piers?" he insisted. "Did you ever tell her how the thing came to pass? Does she know that the quarrel was forced upon you—that you took heavy odds—that you did not of your own free will avoid the consequences? Does she know that you loved her before you knew who she was?"

He paused, but Piers remained stubbornly silent, still prodding at the red coals.

He bent a little, taking him by the shoulder. "Piers, answer me!"

Again Piers' eyes glanced upwards. His face was hard. "Oh, get away, Crowther!" he growled. "What's the good?" And then in his winning way he gripped Crowther's hand hard. "No, I never told her anything," he said. "And I made it impossible for her to ask. I couldn't urge extenuating circumstances because there weren't any. Moreover, it wouldn't have made a ha'porth's difference if I had. So shunt the subject like a good fellow! She must take me at my worst—at my worst, do you hear?—or not at all."

"But, my dear lad, you owe it to her," began Crowther gravely.

Piers cut him short with a recklessness that scarcely veiled the pain in his soul. "No, I don't! I don't owe her anything. She doesn't think any worse of me than I am. She knows me jolly well—better than you do, most worthy padre-elect. If she ever forgives me, it won't be because she

thinks I've been punished enough, but just because she is my mate—and she loves me." His voice sank upon the words.

"And you are going to wait for that?" said Crowther.

Piers nodded. He dropped the poker with a careless clatter and stretched his arms high above his head. "You once said something to me about the Hand of the Sculptor," he said. "Well, if He wants to do any shaping so far as I am concerned, now is His time. I am willing to be shaped."

"What do you mean?" asked Crowther.

Piers' eyes were half-closed, and there was a drawn look about the lids as of a man in pain. "I mean, my good Crowther," he said, "that the mire and clay have ceased to attract me. My house is empty—swept and garnished—but it is not open to devils at present. You want to know my plans. I haven't any. I am waiting to be taken in hand."

He spoke with a faint smile that moved Crowther to deep compassion. "You will have to be patient a long while, maybe, sonny," he said.

"I can be patient," said Piers. He shifted his position slightly, clasping his hands behind his head, so that his face was in shadow. "You think that is not much like me, Crowther," he said. "But I can wait for a thing if I feel I shall get it in the end. I have felt that—ever since the night after I went down there. She was so desperately ill. She wanted me—just to hold her in my arms." His voice quivered suddenly. He stopped for a few seconds, then went on in a lower tone: "She wasn't—quite herself at the time—or she would never have asked for me. But it made a difference to me all the same. It made me see that possibly—just possibly—there is a reason for things—that even misery and iron may have their uses—that there may be something behind it all—what?—Something Divine."

He stopped altogether, and pushed his chair further still into shadow.

Crowther was smoking. He did not speak for several seconds, but smoked on with eyes fixed straight before him as though they scanned a far-distant horizon. At length: "I rather think the shaping has begun, sonny," he said. "You don't believe in prayer, now?"

"No, I don't," said Piers.

Crowther's eyes came down to him. "Can't you pray without believing?" he said slowly.

Piers made a restless movement. "What should I pray for?"

Crowther was smiling slightly—the smile of a man who has begun to see, albeit afar off, the fulfilment of a beloved project.

"Do you know, old chap," he said, "I expect I seem a fool to you; but it's the fools who confound the wise, isn't it? I believe a thundering lot in prayer. But I didn't always. I prayed without believing for a long time first."

"That seems to me like offering an insult to God," said Piers.

"I don't think He views it in that light," said Crowther, "any more than He blames a blind man for feeling his way. The great thing is to do it—to get started. You're wanting a big thing in life. Well—ask for it! Don't be afraid of asking! It's what you're meant to do."

He drew a long whiff from his pipe and puffed it slowly forth.

There fell a deep silence between them. Piers sat in absolute stillness, gazing downwards into the fire with eyes still half-closed.

Suddenly he jerked back his head. "It's a bit of a farce—what?" he said. "But I'll do it on your recommendation. I'll give it a six months' trial, and see what comes of it. That's a fair test, anyhow. Something ought to turn up in another six months."

He got to his feet with a laugh, and stood in front of Crowther with a species of challenge in his eyes. He looked as if he expected rebuke and were prepared to meet it with arrogance.

But Crowther uttered neither reproach nor admonition. He met the look with the utmost kindliness—the most complete understanding.

"Something will turn up, lad," he said, with steady conviction. "But not—probably—in the way you expect."

Piers' face showed a momentary surprise. "How on earth do you know?" he said.

"I do know," Crowther made steadfast reply; but he offered no explanation for his confidence.

Piers thrust out an impulsive hand. "You may be right,

and you may not; but you've been a brick to me, old fellow," he said, a note of deep feeling in his voice—"several kinds of a brick, and I'm not likely to forget it. If you ever get into the Church, you'll be known as the parson who doesn't preach, and it'll be a reputation to be proud of."

Crowther's answering grip was the grip of a giant. There was a great tenderness in the far-seeing grey eyes as he made reply: "It would be rank presumption on my part to preach to you, lad. You are made of infinitely finer stuff than I."

"Oh, rats!" exclaimed Piers in genuine astonishment.

But the elder man shook his head with a smile. "No; facts, Piers!" he said. "There are greater possibilities in you than I could ever attain to."

"Possibilities for evil, then," said Piers, with a very bitter laugh.

Crowther looked him straight in the eyes. "And possibilities for good, my son," he said. "They grow together, thank God."

END OF PART II

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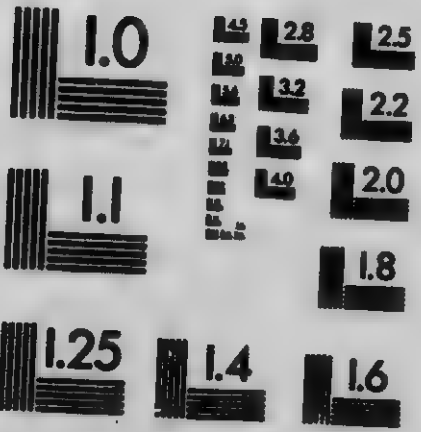

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PART III

THE OPEN HEAVEN

CHAPTER I

THE VERDICT

"IT'S much better than learning by heart," said Jeanie, with her tired little smile. "Somehow, you know, I can't learn by heart—at least not long things. Father says it is because my brain is deficient. But Mother says hers is just the same, so I don't mind so much."

"My dear, it will take you hours to read through all this," said Avery, surveying the task which the Vicar had set his small daughter with dismay.

"Yes," said Jeanie. "I am to devote three hours of every day to it. I had to promise I would." She gave a short sigh. "It's very good for me, you know," she said.

"Is it?" said Avery. She smoothed back the brown hair lovingly. "You mustn't overwork, Jeanie darling," she said.

"I can't help it," said Jeanie quietly. "You see, I promised."

That she would keep her promise, whatever the cost, was evidently a foregone conclusion; and Avery could say nothing against it.

She left the child to work, therefore, and wandered down herself to the shore.

It was June. A soft breeze came over the sea, salt and pure, with the life-giving quality of the great spaces. She breathed it deeply, thankfully, conscious of returning strength.

She and Jeanie had arrived only the week before, and she was sure their visit was going to do wonders for them both. Her own convalescence had been a protracted one, but she told herself as she walked along the beach towards the smiling, evening sea that she was already stronger than her companion. The old lassitude was evidently very heavy upon Jeanie. The smallest exertion seemed to tax her

energies to the utmost. She had never shaken off her cough, and it seemed to wear her out.

Avery had spoken to Lennox Tudor about her more than once, but he never discussed the subject willingly. He was never summoned to the Vicarage now, and, when they chanced to meet, the Vicar invariably reserved for him the iciest greeting that courtesy would permit. Tudor had defeated him once on his own ground, and he was not the man to forget it. So poor Jeanie's ailments were given none but home treatment to alleviate them, and it seemed to Avery that her strength had dwindled almost perceptibly of late.

She pondered the matter as she strolled along the shore, debating with herself if she would indeed take a step that she had been contemplating for some time, and, now that Jeanie was in her care, take her up to town and obtain Maxwell Wyndham's opinion with regard to her. It was a project she had mentioned to no one, and she hesitated a good deal over putting it into practice. That Mrs. Lorimer would readily countenance such an act she well knew, but she was also aware that it would be regarded as a piece of rank presumption by the child's father, which might easily be punished by the final withdrawal of Jeanie from her care. That was a contingency which she hardly desired to risk. Jeanie had become so infinitely precious to her in those days.

Unconsciously her feet had turned towards their old haunt. She found herself halting by the low square rock on which Piers once had sat and cursed the sea-birds in bitterness of spirit. Often as she had visited the spot since, she had never done so without the memory of that spring morning flashing unbidden through her brain. It went through her now like a sharp dart of physical pain; the boyish figure, the ardent eyes, the black hair plastered wet on the wide, patrician brow. Her heart contracted. She seemed to hear again the eager, wooing words.

He never wrote to her now. She believed he was in town, probably amusing himself as he had amused himself at Monte Carlo, passing the time in a round of gaieties, careless flirtations, possibly deeper intrigues. Crowther had probably kept him straight through the winter, but she did not believe that Crowther's influence would be lasting. There was a sting in the very thought of Crowther. She was sure now that he had always known the bitter secret that Piers

had kept from her. It had been the bond between them. Piers had obviously feared betrayal, but Crowther had not deemed it his business to betray him. He had suffered the deception to continue. She recognized that his position had been a difficult one; but it did not soften her heart towards him. Her heart had grown hard towards all men of late. She sometimes thought that but for Jeanie it would have atrophied altogether. There were so few things nowadays that seemed to touch her. She could not even regret her lost baby. But yet the memory of Piers sitting on that rock at her feet pierced her oddly; Piers the passionate, the adoring, the hot-blooded; Piers the invincible; Piers the prince!

She turned from the spot with a wrung feeling of heartbreak. She wished—how she wished—that she had died!

In that moment she realized that she was no longer alone. A man's figure, thick-set and lounging, was sauntering towards her along the sand. He seemed to move with extreme leisureliness, yet his approach was but a matter of seconds. His hands were in his pockets, his hat rammed down over his eyes.

There seemed to her to be something vaguely familiar about him, though wherein it lay she could not have told. She stood and awaited him with the certainty that he was coming with the express purpose of joining her. She knew him; she was sure she knew him, though who he was she had not the faintest idea.

He reached her, lifted his cap, and the sun glinted on a head of fiery red hair. "I thought I was not mistaken, Lady Evesham," he said.

She recognized him with an odd leap of the pulses, and in a moment held out her hand. "Dr. Wyndham!" she said. "How amazing!"

"Why amazing?" said Wyndham. He held her hand for a second while his green eyes scanned her face. When he dropped it she felt that he had made a full and exhaustive inspection, and she was strangely disconcerted, as if in some fashion he had gained an unfair advantage over her.

"Amazing that you should be here," she explained, with a flush of embarrassment.

"Oh, not in the least, I assure you," he said. "I am staying at Brethaven for a couple of days with my wife's

people. It's only ten miles away, you know. And I bicycled over here on the chance of seeing you."

"But how did you know I was here?" she asked.

"From your husband. I told him I was coming in this direction, and he suggested that I should come over and look you up." Very casually he made reply, and he could not have been aware of the flood of colour his words sent to her face, for he continued in the same cool fashion as he strolled by her side: "I was afraid you might consider it an unpardonable liberty, but he assured me you wouldn't. So"—the green eyes smiled upon her imperturbably—"as I am naturally interested in your welfare, I took my courage in both hands and, at the risk of being considered unprofessional—I came."

It was unexpected, but it was disarming. Avery found herself smiling in answer.

"I am very pleased to see you," she said. "But your coming just at this time is rather amazing all the same, for I was thinking of you, wishing I could see you, only a few minutes ago."

"What can I do for you?" said Maxwell Wyndham.

She hesitated a little before the direct question; then as simply as he had asked she answered, laying the matter before him without reservation.

He listened in his shrewd, comprehending way, asking one or two questions, but making no comments.

"There need be no difficulty about it," he said, when she ended. "You say the child is tractable. Keep her in bed to-morrow, and say a medical friend of yours is coming over to see if he can do anything for her cough! Then if you'll ask me to lunch—I'll do the rest."

He smiled as he ended, and thrust out his hand.

"I'll be going now. I left my bicycle in the village and hope to find it still there. Now remember, Lady Evesham, my visit to-morrow is to be of a strictly unprofessional character. You didn't send for me, so I shall assume the privilege of coming as a friend. Is that understood?"

He spoke with smiling assurance, and seeing that he meant to gain his point, she yielded it.

Not till he was gone did she come to ponder the errand that had brought him thither.

She went back to Jeanie, and found her with aching eyes

fixed resolutely on her book. Yes, she was a little tired, but she would rather go on, thank you. Oh no, she did not mind staying in bed to-morrow to please Avery, and she was sure she would like Avery's doctor, though she didn't expect he would manage to stop the cough. She would have to do her task, though, all the same; dear Avery mustn't mind. You see, she had promised. But she would certainly stay in bed if Avery wished.

And then came the tired sigh, and then that racking, cruel cough that seemed to rend her whole frame. No, she would not finish for another hour yet. Really she must go on.

The brown head dropped on to the little bony hands, and Jeanie was immersed once more in her task.

More than once in the night Avery awoke to hear that tearing, breathless cough in the room next to hers. It was no new thing, but in view of the coming ordeal it filled her with misgiving.

When she rose herself in the morning she felt weighed down with anxious foreboding.

Yet, when Maxwell Wyndham arrived in his sauntering, informal fashion at about noon, she was able to meet him with courage. There was something electric about his personality that seemed almost unconsciously to impart strength to the downhearted. He had drawn her back from the very Door of Death, and her confidence in him was absolute.

They lunched alone together, and talked of many things. More than once, wholly incidentally, he mentioned her husband. She gathered that he did not know of their bitter estrangement. He talked of the polo-craze, with which it seemed Piers was badly bitten, and commented on his splendid horsemanship.

"Yes, he is a wonderful athlete," Avery said.

She wondered if he deemed her unresponsive, but decided that he set her coldness down to anxiety; for he finished his luncheon without lingering and declared himself ready for the business in hand.

He became, in fact, strictly businesslike from that moment, and throughout the examination that followed she had not the faintest notion as to what was passing in his mind. To Jeanie he was curtly kind, but to herself he was as utterly uncommunicative as if he had been a total stranger.

The examination was a protracted one, and more painful than Avery had thought possible. It taxed poor Jeanie's powers of endurance to the uttermost, and long before it was finished she was weeping from sheer exhaustion. He was absolutely patient with her, but he insisted upon carrying the matter through, remaining when it was at last over until she had somewhat recovered from the ordeal.

To Avery the suspense was well-nigh unbearable; but she dared not show the impatience that consumed her. She had a feeling that in some fashion the great doctor was depending upon her self-control, her strength of mind; and she was determined that he should not find her wanting.

Yet, when she at length preceded him downstairs and into the little sitting-room, she wondered if the hammering of her heart reached him, so tremendous were its strokes. They seemed to her to be beating out a death-knell in her soul.

"You will tell me the simple truth, I know," she said, and waited, straining to catch his words above the clamour.

He answered her instantly with the utmost quietness, the utmost kindness.

"Lady Evesham, your own heart has already told you the truth."

She put out a quick hand, and he took it and held it firmly, sustainingly, while he went on.

"There is nothing whatever to be done. Give her rest, that's all; absolute rest. She looks as if she has been worked beyond her strength. Is that so?"

Avery nodded mutely.

"It must stop," he said. "She is in a very precarious state, and any exertion, mental or physical, is bound to hasten the end—which cannot, in any case, be very far off."

He released Avery's hand and walked to the window, where he stood gazing out to sea with drawn brows.

"The disease is of a good many months' standing," he said. "It has taken very firm hold. Such a child as that should have been sheltered and cossetted, shielded from every hardship. Even then—very possibly—this would have developed. No one can say for certain."

"Can you advise—nothing?" said Avery in a voice that sounded oddly dull and emotionless even to herself.

"Nothing," said Maxwell Wyndham. "No medical science can help in a case like this. Give her everything she wants, and give her rest! That is all you can do for her now."

Avery came and stood beside him. The blow had fallen, but she had scarcely begun to feel its effects. There was so much to be thought of first.

"Please be quite open with me!" she said. "Tell me how long you think she will live!"

He turned slightly and looked at her. "I can tell you what I think, Lady Evesham," he said. "But, remember, that does not bring the end any nearer."

"I know," she said.

She looked straight back at him with eyes unflinching, and after a moment's thought he spoke:

"I think that—given every care—she may live through the summer, but I do not consider it likely."

Avery's face was very pale, but still she did not flinch. "Will she suffer?" she asked.

He raised his brows at the question. "My dear lady, she has suffered already far more than you have any idea of. One lung is practically gone, wholly useless. The other is rapidly going the same way. She has probably suffered for a year or more, first lassitude, then shortness of breath, and pretty often actual pain. Hasn't she complained of these things?"

"She is a child who never complains," Avery said. "But both her mother and I thought she was wasting."

"She is mere skin and bone," he said. "Now—about her people, Lady Evesham; who is going to tell them? You or I?"

She hesitated. "But I could hardly ask you to do that," she said.

"You may command me in any way," he answered. "If I may presume to advise, I should say that the best course would be for me to go to Rodding, see the doctor there, and get him to take me to the Vicarage."

"Oh, but they mustn't take her from me!" Avery said. "Let her mother come here! She can't—she mustn't—go back home!"

"Exactly what I was going to say," he returned, in his quiet, practical fashion. "To take her back there would

be madness. But look here, Lady Evesham, you must have a nurse."

"Oh, not yet!" said Avery. "I am quite strong now. I am used to nursing. I have—no other call upon me. Let me do this!"

"None?" he said.

His tone recalled her. She coloured burningly. "My husband—would understand," she said, with difficulty.

He passed the matter by. "Will you promise to send me a message if you find night-nursing a necessity?"

She hesitated.

He frowned. "Lady Evesham, you must promise me this in fairness to the child as well as to yourself. Also you will give me your word that you will never under any circumstances sleep with her."

She saw that he would have his way, and she yielded both points rather than fight a battle which instinct warned her she could not win.

"Then I will be going," he said.

He turned back into the room, and again she was aware of his green eyes surveying her closely, critically. But he made no reference whatever to her health, and inwardly she blessed him for his forbearance.

She did not know that as he rode away, he grimly remarked to himself: "The best tonics generally taste the bitterest, and she'll drink this one to the dregs, poor girl! But it'll help her in the end."

CHAPTER II

THE TIDE COMES BACK

"GIVE her everything she wants!" How often in the days that followed were those words in Avery's mind! She strove to fulfil them to the uttermost, but Jeanie seemed to want so little. The only trouble in her existence just then was her holiday-task, and that she steadily refused to relinquish unless her father gave her leave.

A few days after Maxwell Wyndham's departure there came an agonized letter from Mrs. Lorimer. Olive had just developed scarlet fever, and as they could not afford a nurse

she was nursing her herself. She entreated Avery to send her daily news of Jeanie and to telegraph at once should she become worse. She added in a pathetic postscript that her husband found it difficult to believe that Jeanie could be as ill as the great doctor had represented, and she feared he was a little vexed that Maxwell Wyndham's opinion had been obtained.

It was exactly what Avery had expected of him. She wrote a soothing letter to Mrs. Lorimer, promising to keep her informed of Jeanie's condition, promising to lavish every care upon the child, and begging her to persuade Mr. Lorimer to remit the task which had become so heavy a burden.

The reply to this did not come at once, and Avery had repeated the request twice very urgently, and was contemplating addressing a protest to the Reverend Stephen in person when another agitated epistle arrived from Mrs. Lorimer. Her husband had decided to run down to them for a night and judge of Jeanie's state for himself.

Avery received the news with dismay, which, however, she was careful to conceal. Jeanie heard of the impending visit with as much perturbation as her tranquil nature would allow, and during the day that intervened before his arrival gave herself more sedulously than ever to her task. She had an unhappy premonition that he would desire to examine her upon what she had read, and she was guiltily aware that her memory had not retained very much of it.

So for the whole of one day she strove to study, till she was so completely tired out that Avery actually took the book from her at last and declared that she should not worry herself any more about it. Jeanie yielded submissively, but a wakeful night followed, and in the morning she looked so wan that Avery wanted to keep her in bed.

On this point, however, Jeanie was less docile than usual. "He will think I am shamming," she protested. "He never likes us to lie in bed unless we are really ill."

So, since she was evidently anxious to get up, Avery permitted it, though she marked her obvious langour with a sinking heart.

The Vicar arrived at about noon, and Avery saw at a glance that he was in no kindly mood.

"Dear me, what is all this fuss?" he said to Jeanie.

"You look to me considerably rosier than I have seen you for a long time."

Jeanie was indeed flushed with nervous excitement, and Avery thought she had never seen her eyes so unnaturally bright. She endured her father's hand under her chin with evident discomfort, and the Vicar's face was somewhat severe when he finally released her.

"I am afraid you are getting a little fanciful, my child," he said gravely. "I know that our kind friend Lady Evesham"—his eyes twinkled ironically and seemed to slip inwards—"has always been inclined to indulge your whims. Now, how do you occupy your time?"

"I read," faltered Jeanie.

"And sew, I presume," said the Vicar, who prided himself upon bringing up his daughter to be useful.

"A little," said Jeanie.

He opened his eyes upon her again with that suggestion of severity in his regard which Jeanie so plainly dreaded. "But you have done none since you have been here? Jeanie, my child, I detect in you the seeds of idleness. If your time were more fully occupied, you would find your general health would considerably improve. Now, do you rise early and go for a bathe before breakfast?"

"No," said Jeanie, with a little shiver.

He shook his head at her. "Then let us institute the habit at once! I cannot have you becoming slack just because you are away from home. If this indolence continues, I shall be compelled to have you back under my own eye. I clearly see that the self-indulgent life you lead here is having disastrous results. You will bathe with me to-morrow at seven-thirty, after which we will have half an hour of physical exercise. Then, after a wholesome breakfast, you will feel renewed and ready for the day's work."

Avery, when this programme was laid before her, looked at him in incredulous amazement.

"But surely Dr. Wyndham explained to you the serious condition she is in!" she exclaimed.

Mr. Lorimer smiled his own superior smile. "He explained his point of view most thoroughly, my dear Lady Evesham." He always pronounced her name and title with satirical emphasis. "But that—very curious as it may appear to you—does not prevent my holding a very strong opinion

of my own. And it chances to be in direct opposition to that expressed by Dr. Maxwell Wyndham. I know my own child—her faults and her tendencies. She has been allowed to become extremely lax with regard to her daily duties, and this laxness is in my opinion the root of the evil. I shall therefore take my own measures to correct it, and if they are in any way resisted or neglected I shall at once remove the child from your care. I trust I have made myself quite explicit."

He had. But Avery's indignation could not be contained.

"You will kill her if you persist!" she said. "Even as it is—even as it is—her days are numbered."

"The days of all of us are numbered," said the Reverend Stephen. "And it behoves us to make the very utmost of each one of them. I cannot allow my child's character to be ruined on account of a physical weakness which a little judicious discipline will speedily overcome. The spirit must triumph over the flesh, Lady Evesham. A hard rule for worldlings, I grant you, but one which must be observed by all who would enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

Argument was futile. Avery realized it at the outset. He would have his way, whatever the cost, and no warning or entreaty would move him. For the rest of that day she had to stand by in impotent anguish, and watch Jeanie's martyrdom. During the afternoon he sat alone with her, conducting the intellectual examination which Jeanie had so dreaded, reprimanding, criticizing, scoffing at her ignorance. In the evening he took her for what he called a stroll, upon which Avery was not allowed to accompany them, Mr. Lorimer playfully remarking that he wished to give his young daughter the benefit of his individual attention during the period of his brief sojourn with them.

They returned from their expedition at eight. Avery was walking to and fro by the gate in a ferment of anxiety. They came by the cliff-road, and she went eagerly to meet them.

Jeanie was hanging on her father's arm with a face of deathly whiteness, and looked on the verge of collapse.

The Reverend Stephen was serenely satisfied with himself, laughed gently at his child's dragging progress, and assured Avery that a little wholesome fatigue was a good thing at the end of the day.

Jeanie said nothing. She seemed to be speechless with exhaustion, almost incapable of standing alone.

Mr. Lorimer recommended a cold bath, a brisk rub-down, and supper.

"After which," he said impressively, "I shall hope to conduct a few prayers before we retire to rest."

"That will be impossible, I am afraid," Avery rejoined. "Jeanie is overtired and must go at once to bed."

She spoke with quiet decision, but inwardly she was quivering with fierce anger. She longed passionately to have the child to herself, to comfort and care for her and ease away the troubles of the day.

But Mr. Lorimer at once asserted his authority. "Jeanie will certainly join us at supper," he said. "Run along, my child, and prepare for the meal at once!"

Jeanie went up the stairs like an old woman, stumbling at every step.

Avery followed her, chafing but impotent.

At the top of the stairs Jeanie began to cough. She turned into her own room with blind, staggering movements and sank down beside the bed.

The coughing was spasmodic and convulsive. It shook her whole frame. In the end there came a dreadful tearing sound, and she caught her handkerchief to her mouth.

Avery knelt beside her, supporting her. She saw the white linen turn suddenly scarlet, and she called sharply to Mr. Lorimer to come to them.

He came, and between them they got her on to the bed.

"This is most unfortunate," said Mr. Lorimer. "Pray, how did it happen?"

And then Avery's pent fury blazed suddenly forth upon him. "It is your doing!" she said. "You—and you alone—are responsible for this!"

He looked at her malignantly. "Pshaw, my dear Lady Evesham! You are hysterical!" he said.

Avery was bending over the bed. "Go!" she said, without looking up. "Go quickly and fetch a doctor!"

And, very curiously, Mr. Lorimer obeyed her.

CHAPTER III

THE GAME

JEANIE rallied. As though to comfort Avery's distress, she came back for a little space; but no one—not even her father—could doubt any longer that the poor little mortal life had nearly run out.

"My intervention has come too late, alas!" said Mr. Lorimer.

Which remark was received by Avery in bitter silence.

She had no further fear of being deprived of the child. It was quite out of the question to think of moving her, and she knew that Jeanie was hers for as long as the frail cord of her earthly existence lasted.

She was thankful that the advent of a nurse made it impossible for the Vicar to remain, and she parted from him with almost open relief.

"We must bow to the Supreme Will," he said, with his heavy sigh.

And again Avery was silent.

"I fear you are rebellious," he said with severity.

"Good-bye!" said Avery.

Her heart bled more for Mrs. Lorimer than for herself just then. She knew by instinct that she would not be allowed to come to her child.

The nurse was middle-aged and kindly, and both she and Jeanie liked her from the outset. She took the night duty, and the day was Avery's, a division that pleased them all.

Mr. Lorimer had demurred about having a nurse at all, but Avery had swept the objection aside. Jeanie was in her care, and she would provide all she needed. Mr. Lorimer had conceded the point as gracefully as possible, for it seemed that for once his will could not be regarded as paramount. Of course, as he openly reflected, Lady Evesham was very much in their debt, and it was but natural that she should welcome this opportunity to repay somewhat of their past kindness to her.

So, for the first time in her life, little Jeanie was sur-

rounded with all that she could desire; and very slowly, like a broken flower coaxed back to life, she revived again.

It could scarcely be regarded in the light of an improvement. It was just a fluctuation that deceived neither Avery nor the nurse; but to the former those days were infinitely precious. She clung to them hour by hour, refusing to look ahead to the desolation that was surely coming, cherishing her darling with a passion of devotion that excluded all other griefs.

The long summer days slipped away. June passed like a dream. Jeanie lay in the tiny garden with her face to the sea, gazing forth with eyes that were often heavy and wistful but always ready to smile upon Avery. The holiday-task was put away, not because Mr. Lorimer had remitted it, but because Avery—with rare despotism—had insisted upon removing it from her patient's reach.

"Not till you are better, darling," she said. "That is your biggest duty now, just to get back all the strength you can."

And Jeanie had smiled her wistful, dreamy smile, and submitted.

Avery sometimes wondered if she knew of the great Change that was drawing so rapidly near. If so, it had no terrors for her; and she thanked God that the Vicar was not at hand to terrify the child. The journey from Rodding to Stanbury Cliffs was not an easy one by rail, and parish matters were fortunately claiming his attention very fully just then. As he himself had remarked more than once, he was not the man to permit mere personal matters to interfere with Duty, and many a weak soul depended upon his ministrations.

So Jeanie was left entirely to Avery's motherly care while the golden days slipped by.

With July came heat, intense, oppressive, airless; and Jeanie flagged again. A copper-coloured mist rose every morning over the sea, blotting out the sky-line, veiling the passing ships. Strange voices called through the fog, sirens hooted to one another persistently.

"They are like people who have lost each other," Jeanie said once, and the simile haunted Avery's imagination.

And then one sunny day a pleasure-steamer passed quite near the shore with a band on board. They were playing "The Little Grey Home in the West," and very oddly Jeanie's eyes filled with sudden tears.

Avery did not take any notice for a few moments, but as the strains died away over the glassy water, she leaned towards the child.

"My darling, what is it?" she whispered tenderly.

Jeanie's hand found its way into hers. "Oh, don't you ever want Piers?" she murmured wistfully. "I do!"

It was the first time she had spoken his name to Avery since they had left him alone nearly a year before, and almost as soon as she had uttered it she made swift apology.

"Please forgive me, dear Avery! It just slipped out."

"My dear!" Avery said, and kissed her.

There fell a long silence between them. Avery's eyes were on the thick heat-haze that obscured the sky-line. In her brain there sounded again those words that Maxwell Wyndham had spoken so short a time before: "Give her everything she wants! It's all you can do for her now."

But behind those words was something that shrank and quivered like a frightened child. Could she give her this one thing? Could she?

It would mean the tearing open of a wound that was scarcely closed. It would mean a calling to life of a bitterness that was hardly past. It would mean—it would mean——

"Avery darling!" Softly Jeanie's voice broke through her agitated thoughts.

Avery turned and looked at her—the frail, sweet face with its shining eyes of love.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," whispered Jeanie. "Don't think any more about it!"

"Do you want him so dreadfully?" Avery said.

Jeanie's eyes were full of tears again. She tried to answer, but her lips quivered. She turned her face aside, and was silent.

The day waxed hotter, became almost insupportable. In the afternoon Jeanie was attacked by breathlessness and coughing, both painful to witness. She could find no rest or comfort, and Avery was in momentary dread of a return of the hæmorrhage.

It did not return, but when evening came at length and with it the blessed coolness of approaching night, Jeanie was so exhausted as to be unable to speak above a whisper. She lay white and still, scarcely conscious, only her difficult

breathing testifying to the fluttering life that had ebbed so low.

The nurse's face was very grave as she came on duty, but after an interval of steady watching, during which the wind blew in with rising freshness from the sea, she turned to Avery, saying, "I think she will revive."

Avery nodded and slipped away.

There was not much time left. She ran all the way to the post-office and scribbled a message there with trembling fingers:

"Jeanie wants you. Will you come? AVERY."

She sent the message to Rodding Abbey. She knew they would forward it from there.

Passing out again into the road, a sudden sense of sickness swept over her. What had she done? What uncontrolled force would that telegram unfetter? Would he come to her like a whirlwind and sweep her back into his own tempestuous life? Would he break her will once more to his? Would he drag her once more through the hell of his passion, kindle afresh for her the flame that had consumed her happiness?

She dared not face the possibility. She felt as if an iron hand had closed upon her, drawing her surely, irresistibly, back towards those gates of brass through which she had escaped into the desert. That fiery torture would be infinitely harder to bear now, and she knew that the fiercest point of it all would be the desperate, aching longing to know again the love that had shone and burned itself out in the blast-furnace of his sin. He had loved her once; she was sure he had loved her. But that love had died with his boyhood, and it could never rise again. He had trodden it underfoot and her own throbbing heart with it. He had destroyed that which she had always believed to be indestructible.

She never wanted to see him again. She would have given all she had to have avoided the meeting. Her whole being recoiled from the thought of it. And yet—and yet—she saw again the black head laid against her knee, and heard the low, half-rueful words: "Oh, my dear, there is no other woman but you in all the world!"

The vision went with her all through the night. She could not escape it.

In the morning she rose with a sense of being haunted and a terrible weariness that hung upon her like a chain.

The day was cooler. Jeanie was better. She had had a nice sleep, the nurse said. But there could be no question of allowing her to leave her bed that day.

"You are looking so tired," she said, in her kind way. "I am not wanting to go off duty till this afternoon. So won't you go and sit down somewhere on the rocks? Please do!"

She was so anxious to gain her point that Avery yielded. She felt too feverishly restless to be a suitable companion for Jeanie just then. She went down to her favourite corner to watch the tide come in. But she could not be still. She paced the shore like a caged creature seeking a way of escape, dreading each turn lest it should bring her face to face with the man she had summoned.

The tide came in and drove her up the beach. She went back not unwillingly, for the suspense had become insupportable.

Had he come? But surely not! She was convinced he would have followed her to the shore if he had.

She entered the tiny hall. It was square, and served them as a sitting-room. Coming in from the glare without, she was momentarily dazzled. And then all suddenly her eyes lighted upon an unaccustomed object, and her heart ceased to beat. A man's tweed cap lay carelessly tossed upon the back of a chair!

She stood quite still, feeling her senses reel, knowing herself to be on the verge of fainting, and clinging with all her strength to her tottering self-control.

Gradually she recovered, felt her heart begin to beat again and the deadly faintness pass. There was a telegram on the table. She took it up, found it addressed to herself, opened it with fumbling fingers.

"Tell Jeanie I am coming to-day. PIERS."

It had arrived an hour before, and she was conscious of a vague sense of thankfulness that she had been spared that hour of awful certainty.

A door opened at the top of the stairs. A voice spoke. "I'll come back, my queen. But I've got to pay my respects, you know, to the mistress of the establishment, or she'll be cross. Do you remember the Avery symphony? We'll have it presently."

A light step followed the voice. Already he was on the stairs. He came bounding down to her like an eager boy. For one wild moment she thought he was going to throw his arms about her. But he stopped himself before he reached her.

"I say, how ill you look!" he said.

That was all the greeting he uttered, and in the same moment she saw that the black hair above his forehead was powdered with white. It sent such a shock through her as no word or action of his could have caused.

She stood for a moment gazing at him in still inaction. Then, still stiffly, she held out her hand. But she could not utter a word. She felt as if she were going to burst into tears.

He took her hand. His dark eyes interrogated her, but they told her nothing. "It's all right," he said rapidly. "I'm Jeanie's visitor. I shan't forget it. It was decent of you to send. I say, you—you are not really ill—what?"

No, she was not ill. She heard herself telling him so in a voice she did not know. And all the while she felt as if her heart were bleeding, bleeding to death.

He let her hand go, and straightened himself with the old free arrogance of movement. "May I have something to eat?" he said. "Your message only got to me this morning. I was at breakfast, and I had to leave it to catch the train. So I've had practically nothing."

That moved her to activity. She led the way into the little parlour where luncheon had been laid. He sat down at the table, and she waited upon him, almost in silence, yet no longer with embarrassment.

"Aren't you going to join me?" he said.

She sat down also, and took a minute helping of cold chicken.

"I say, you're not going to eat all that!" ejaculated Lorn.

She had to laugh a little, though still with that horrified sense of tragedy at her heart.

He laughed too his careless boyish laugh, and in a moment all the electricity of the past few moments had gone out of the atmosphere. He leaned forward unexpectedly and transferred a wing of chicken from his plate to hers.

"Look here, Avery! You must eat. It's absurd. So fire away like a sensible woman!"

There was no tenderness in his tone, but, oddly, she thrilled to its imperiousness, conscious of the old magnetism compelling her. She began to eat in silence.

Piers ate too in his usual quick fashion, glancing at her once or twice but making no further comment.

"Tell me about Jeanie!" he said finally. "What has brought her to this? Can't we do anything—take her to Switzerland or somewhere?"

Avery shook her head. "Can't you see?" she said in a low voice.

He frowned upon her abruptly. "I see lots," he said enigmatically. "It's quite hopeless—what? Wyndham told me as much. But—I don't believe in hopeless things."

Avery looked at him, mystified by his tone. "She is dying," she said.

"I don't believe in death either," said Piers, in the tone of one who challenged the world. "And now look here, Avery! Let's make the best of things for the kiddie's sake! She's had a rotten time all her days. Let's give her a decent send-off—what? Let's give her the time of her life before she goes!"

He got up suddenly from his chair and went to the open window.

Avery turned her head to watch him, but for some reason she could not speak.

He went on vehemently, his face turned from her. "In heaven's name don't let's be sorry! It's such a big thing to go out happy. Let's play the game! I know you can; you were always plucky. Let's give her everything she wants and some over! What, Avery, what? I'm not asking for myself."

She did not know exactly what he was asking, but she did not dare to tell him so. She sat quite silent, feeling her heart quicken, striving desperately to be calm.

He flung round suddenly, and came to her. "Will you do it?" he said.

She raised her eyes to his. She was white to the lips.

He made one of his quick, half-foreign gestures. "Don't!" he said harshly. "You make me feel such a brute. Can't you trust me—can't you pretend to trust me—for Jeanie's sake?" His hand closed fiercely on the back of her chair. He bent towards her. "It's only a hollow bargain. You'll hate it of course. Do you suppose I shall enjoy it any better? Do you suppose I would ask it of you for any reason but this?"

Something in his face or voice pierced her. She felt again that dreadful pain at her heart, as if the blood were draining from it with every beat.

"I don't know what to say to you, Piers," she said at last.

He bit his lip in sheer impatience, but the next moment he controlled himself. "I'm asking a difficult thing of you," he said, forcing his voice to a quiet level. "It isn't particularly easy for me either; perhaps in a sense it's even harder. But you must have known when you sent for me that something of the kind was inevitable. What you didn't know—possibly—was that Jeanie is grieving badly over our estrangement. She wants to draw us together again. Will you suffer it? Will you play the game with me? It won't be for long."

His eyes looked straight into hers, but they held only a great darkness in which no flicker of light burned. Avery felt as if the gulf between them had widened to a measureless abyss. Once she could have read him like an open book; but now she had not the vaguest clue to his feelings or his motives. He had, as it were, withdrawn beyond her ken.

"Is it to be only make-believe?" she asked at last.

"Just that," he said, but she thought his voice rang hard as he said it.

An odd little tremor went through her. She put her hand up to her throat. "Piers, I don't know—I am afraid——" She broke off in agitation.

He leaned towards her. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "There is nothing so damning as fear. Shall we go up to her now? I promised I wouldn't be long."

She rose. He was still standing close to her, so close that she felt the warmth of his body, heard the sharp indrawing of his breath.

For one sick second she thought he would snatch her to him; but the second passed and he had not moved.

"Shall we go?" he said again. "And I say, can you put me up? I don't care where I sleep. Any sort of shakedown will do. That sofa"—he glanced towards the one by the window upon which Jeanie had been wont to lie.

"If you like," Avery said.

She felt that the power to refuse him had left her. He would do as he thought fit.

They went upstairs together, and she saw Jeanie's face light up as they entered. Piers was behind. Coming forward, he slipped a confident hand through her arm. She felt his fingers close upon her warningly, checking her slight start; and she knew with an odd mixture of relief and dismay that this was the beginning of the game. She forced herself to smile in answer, and she knew that she succeeded; but it was one of the greatest efforts of her life.

CHAPTER IV

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

FOR a week after Piers' arrival Jeanie was better, so much better that she was able to be carried downstairs and into the garden where she loved to lie. There was a piano in the sitting-room, and Piers would sit at it by the hour together, playing anything she desired. She loved his music, would listen entranced for any length of time while he led her through a world of delight that she had never explored before. It soothed her restlessness, comforted her in weariness, made her forget her pain.

And then the summer weather broke. There came a spell of rainy days that made the garden impossible, and immediately Jeanie's strength began to wane. It went from her very gradually. She suffered but little, save when her breathing or her cough troubled her. But it was evident to them all that her little craft was putting out to sea at last.

Piers went steadfastly on with the rôle he had assigned to himself. He never by word or look reminded Avery of the compact between them. He merely took her support for granted, and—probably in consequence of this—it never failed him.

The nurse declared him to be invaluable. He always

had a salutary effect upon her patient. For even more than at the sight of Avery did Jeanie brighten at his coming, and she was always happy alone with him. It even occurred to Avery sometimes that her presence was scarcely needed, so completely were they at one in understanding and sympathy.

One evening, entering the room unexpectedly, she found Piers on his knees beside the bed. He rose instantly and made way for her in a fashion she could not ignore; but, though Jeanie greeted her with evident pleasure, it was obvious that for the moment she was not needed, and an odd little pang went through her with the knowledge.

Piers left the room almost immediately, and in a few moments they heard him at the piano downstairs.

"May I have the door open?" whispered Jeanie.

Avery opened it, and drawing up a chair, sat down with her work at the bedside.

And then, slowly rolling forth, there came that wonderful music with which he had thrilled her soul at the very beginning of his courtship.

Wordless, magnificent, the great anthem swelled through the falling dusk, and like a vision the unutterable arose and possessed her soul. Her eyes began to behold the Land That is very far off.

And then, throbbing through the wonder of that vision, she heard the coming of the vast procession. It was like a dream, and yet it was wholly real. As yet lost in distance, veiled in mystery, she heard the tread of the coming host.

Her hands were fast gripped together, she forgot all beside. It was as if the eyes of her soul had been opened, and she looked upon the Infinite. A voice at her side began to speak, or was it the voice of her own heart? It was only a whisper, but every word of it pierced her consciousness. She listened with parted lips.

"I saw Heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and He That sat upon him was called Faithful and True. . . . His Eyes were as a flame of fire, and on His Head were many crowns. . . . And He was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood. . . . And the armies which were in Heaven followed Him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. . . . And He treadeth the winepress. . . . He treadeth the winepress. . . ."

The voice paused. Avery was listening with bated breath for more. But it did not come at once. Only the Veil began to lift, so that she saw the Opening Gates and the Glory behind them.

Then, and not till then, the dream-voice spoke again. "Surely—surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried—our sorrows. . . . And the Lord hath laid on Him—the iniquity of us all." The music crashed into wonder-chords such as Avery had never heard before, swelled to a climax that reached the Divine, held her quivering as it were upon wings in a space that was more transcendent than the highest mountain-top;—then softly, strangely, died. . . .

"That is Heaven," whispered the voice by her side. "Oh, Avery, won't it be nice when we are all there together?"

But Avery sat as one in a trance, rapt and still. She felt as if the spirit had been charmed out of her body, and she did not want to return.

A little thin hand slid into hers and clasped it close, recalling her. "Wasn't it beautiful?" said Jeanie. "He said he would make me see the Kingdom of Heaven. You saw it too, dear Avery, didn't you?"

Yes, Avery had seen it too. She still felt as if the earth were very far below them both.

Jeanie's voice had grown husky, but she still spoke in a tremulous whisper. "Did you see the Open Gates, dear Avery? He says they are never shut. And anyone who can reach them will be let in—it doesn't matter who. Do you know, I think Piers is different from what he used to be. I think he is learning to love God."

Absolutely simple words! Why did they send such a rush of feeling—tumultuous, indescribable feeling—through Avery? Was this the explanation? Was this how it came to pass that he treated her with that aloof reverence day by day? Was he indeed learning the supreme lesson to worship God with love?

She sat for a while longer with Jeanie, till, finding her drowsy, she slipped downstairs.

Piers was sitting in the hall, deep in a newspaper. He rose at her coming with an abruptness suggestive of surprise and stood waiting for her to speak.

But curiously the only words that she could utter were of a trivial nature. She had come to him, indeed, drawn by

a power irresistible, but the moment she found herself actually in his presence she felt tongue-tied, helpless.

"Don't you want a light?" she said nervously. "I am sure you can't see to read."

He stood silent for a moment, and the old tormenting doubt began to rise within her. Would he think she desired to make an overture? Would he take for granted that because his magnetism had drawn her he could do with her as he would?

And then very quietly he spoke, and she experienced an odd revulsion of feeling that was almost disappointment.

"Have you been reading the papers lately?"

She had not. Jeanie occupied all her waking thoughts.

He glanced down at the sheet he held. "There is going to be a bust-up on the Continent," he said, and there was that in his tone—a grim elation—which puzzled her at the moment. "The mightiest bust-up the world has ever known. We're in for it, Avery; in for the very deuce of a row." His voice vibrated suddenly. He stopped as though to check some headlong force that threatened to carry him away.

Avery stood still, feeling a sick horror of impending disaster at her heart. "What can you mean?" she said.

He leaned his hands upon the table, facing her, and she saw in his eyes the primitive, savage joy of battle. "I mean war," he said. "Oh, it's horrible; yes, of course it's horrible. But it'll bring us to our senses. It'll make men of us yet."

She shrank from his look. "Piers! Not—not a European war!"

He straightened himself slowly. "Yes," he said. "It will be that. But there's nothing to be scared about. It'll be the salvation of the Empire."

"Piers!" she gasped again through white lips. "But modern warfare! Modern weapons! It's Germany of course?"

"Yes, Germany." He stretched up his arms with a wide gesture and let them fall. "Germany who is going to cut out all the rot of party politics and bind us together as one man! Germany who is going to avert civil war and teach us to love our neighbours! Nothing short of this would have saved us. We've been a mere horde of chatter-

ing monkeys lately. Now—all thanks to Germany!—we're going to be men!"

"Or murderers!" said Avery.

The word broke from her involuntarily, she scarcely knew that she had uttered it until she saw his face. Then in a flash she saw what she had done, for he had the sudden tragic look of a man who has received his death-wound.

He made her a curious stiff bow as if he bent himself with difficulty. His face at that moment was whiter than hers, but his eyes glowed red with a deep anger.

"I shall remember that," he said, "when I go to fight for my country."

With the words he turned to the door. But she cried after him, dismayed, incoherent.

"Oh Piers, you know—you know—I didn't mean that!"

He did not pause or look back. "Nevertheless you said it," he rejoined in a tone that made her feel as if he had flung an icy shower of water in her face; and the next moment she heard his quick tread on the garden path and realized that he was gone.

It was useless to attempt to follow him. Her knees were trembling under her. Moreover, she knew that she must return to Jeanie. White-lipped, quivering, she moved to the stairs.

He had utterly misunderstood her; she had but voiced the horrified thought that must have risen in the minds of thousands when first brought face to face with that world-wide tragedy. But he had read a personal meaning into her words. He had deemed her deliberately cruel, ungenerous, bitter. That he could thus misunderstand her set her heart bleeding afresh. Oh, they were better apart! How was it possible that there could ever be any confidence, any intimacy, between them again?

Tears, scalding, blinding tears ran suddenly down her face. She bowed her head in her hands, leaning upon the banisters. . . .

A voice called to her from above, and she started. What was she doing, weeping here in selfish misery, when Jeanie——. Swiftly she commanded herself and mounted the stairs. The nurse met her at the top.

"The little one isn't so well," she said. "I thought she was asleep, but I am afraid she is unconscious."

"Oh, Nurse, and I left her!"

There was a sound of such heart-break in Avery's voice that the nurse's grave face softened in sympathy.

"My dear, you couldn't have done anything," she said. "It is just the weakness before the end, and we can do nothing to avert it. What about her mother? Can she come?"

Avery shook her head in despair. "Not for a week."

"Ah!" the nurse said; and that was all. But Avery knew in that moment that only a few hours more remained ere little Jeanie Lorimer passed through the Open Gates.

She would not go to bed that night, though the child lay wholly unconscious of her. She knew that she could not sleep.

She did not see Piers again till late. The nurse slipped down to tell him of Jeanie's condition, and he came up, white and sternly composed, and stood for many minutes watching the slender, quick-breathing figure that lay propped among pillows, close to the open window.

Avery could not look at his face during those minutes; she dared not. But when he turned away at length he bent and spoke to her.

"Are you going to stay here?"

"Yes," she whispered.

He made no attempt to dissuade her. All he said was: "May I wait in your room? I shall be within call there."

"Of course," she answered.

"And you will call me if there is any change?"

"Of course," she said again.

He nodded briefly and left her.

Then began the long, long night-watch. It was raining, and the night was very dark. The slow, deep roar of the sea rose solemnly and filled the quiet room. The tide was coming in. They could hear the water shoaling along the beach.

How often Avery had listened to it and loved the sound! To-night it filled her soul with awe, as the Voice of Many Waters.

Slowly the night wore on, and ever that sound increased in volume, swelling, intensifying, like the coming of a mighty host as yet far off. The rain pattered awhile and ceased. The sea-breeze blew in, salt and pure. It stirred the brown

tendrils of hair on Jeanie's forehead, and eddied softly through the room.

The nurse sat working beside a hooded lamp that threw her grave, strong face into high relief, but only accentuated the shadows in the rest of the room. Avery sat close to the bed, not praying, scarcely thinking, waiting only for the opening of the Gates. And in that hour she longed—oh, how passionately!—that when they opened she also might be permitted to pass through.

It was in the darkest hour of the night that the tide began to turn. She looked almost instinctively for a change, but none came. Jeanie stirred not, save when the nurse stooped over her to give her nourishment, and each time she took less and less.

The tide receded. The night began to pass. There came a faint greyness before the window. The breeze freshened.

And very suddenly the breathing to which Avery had listened all the night paused, ceased for a second or two, then broke into the sharp sigh of one awaking from sleep.

She rose quickly, and the nurse looked up. Jeanie's eyes, dark, unearthly, unafraid, were opened wide.

She gazed at Avery for a moment as if slightly puzzled. Then, in a faint whisper: "Has Piers said good-night?" she asked.

"No, darling. But he is waiting to. I will call him," Avery said.

"Quickly!" whispered the nurse, as she passed her.

Swiftly, noiselessly, Avery went to her own room. But some premonition of her coming must have reached him, for he met her on the threshold.

His eyes questioned hers for a moment, and then together they turned back to Jeanie's room. No words passed between them. None were needed.

Jeanie's face was turned towards the door. Her eyes looked beyond Avery and smiled a welcome to Piers. He came to her, knelt beside her.

"Dear Sir Galahad!" she said.

He shook his head. "No, Jeanie, no!"

She was panting. He slipped his arm under the pillow to support her. She turned her face to his.

"Oh, Piers," she breathed, "I do—so—want you—to be happy."

"I am happy, sweetheart," he said.

But Jeanie's vision was stronger in that moment than it had ever been before, and she was not deceived. "You are not happy, dear Piers," she said. "Avery is not happy either."

Piers turned slightly. "Come here, Avery!" he said.

The old imperious note was in his voice, yet with a difference. He stretched his free hand up to her, drawing her down to his side, and as she knelt also he passed his arm about her, pressing her to him.

Jeanie's eyes were upon them both, dying eyes that shone with a mystic glory. They saw the steadfast resolution in Piers' face as he held his wife against his heart. They saw the quivering hesitation with which she yielded.

"You're not happy—yet," she whispered. "But you will be happy."

Thereafter she seemed to slip away from them for a space, losing touch as it were, yet still not beyond their reach. Once or twice she seemed to be trying to pray, but they could not catch her words.

The dawn-light grew stronger before the window. The sound of the waves had sunk to a low murmuring. From where she knelt Avery could see the far, dim line of sea. Piers' arm was still about her. She felt as though they two were kneeling apart before an Altar invisible, waiting to receive a blessing.

Jeanie's breathing was growing less hurried. She seemed already beyond all earthly suffering. Yet her eyes also watched that far, dim sky-line as though they waited for a sign.

Slowly the light deepened, the shadows began to lift. Piers' eyes were fixed unswervingly upon the child's quiet face. The light of the coming Dawn was reflected there. The great Change was very near at hand.

Far away to the left there grew and spread a wondrous brightness. The sky seemed to recede, turned from grey to misty blue. A veil of cloud that had hidden the stars all through the night dissolved softly into shreds of gold, and across the sea with a diamond splendour there shot the first great ray of sunlight.

It was then that Jeanie seemed to awake, to rise as it

were from the depths of reverie. Her eyes widened, grew intense; then suddenly they smiled.

She sought to raise herself, and never knew that it was by Piers' strength alone that she was lifted. She gave a gasp that was almost a cry, but it was gladness not pain that it expressed.

For a few panting moments she gazed out as one rapt in delight, gazing from a mountain-peak upon a wider view than earthly eyes could compass.

Then eagerly she turned to Piers. "I saw Heaven opened . . ." she said, and in her low voice there throbbed a rapture that could not be uttered in words.

She would have said more, but Something stopped her. She made a gesture as though she would clasp him round the neck, failed, and sank down in his arms.

He held her closely to him, and so holding her, felt the last quivering breath slip from the little tired body. . . .

CHAPTER V

THE DESERT ROAD

"THAT is just where you make a mistake, my good Crowther. You're an awfully shrewd chap in some ways, but you understand women just about as thoroughly as I understand theology."

Piers clasped his hands behind his head, and regarded his friend affectionately.

"Do you think so?" said Crowther a little dryly.

Piers laughed. "Now I've trodden on your pet corn. Bear up, old chap! It'll soon be better."

Crowther's own face relaxed, but he did not look satisfied. "I'm not happy about you, my son," he said. "I think you've missed a big opportunity."

"You think wrong," said Piers, unmoved. "I couldn't possibly have stayed another hour. I was in a false position. So—poor girl!—was she. We buried the hatchet for the kiddie's sake, but it wasn't buried very deep. I did my best, and I think she did hers. But—even that last night—we kicked against it. There was no sense in pretending any longer. The game was up. So—I came away."

He uttered the last words nonchalantly; but if Crowther's knowledge of women were limited, he knew his own species very thoroughly, and he was not deceived.

"You didn't see her at all after the little girl died?" he asked.

"Not at all," said Piers. "I came away by the first train I could catch."

"And left her to her trouble!" Crowther's wide brow was a little drawn. There was even a hint of sternness in his steady eyes.

"Just so," said Piers. "I left her to mourn in peace."

"Didn't you so much as write a line of explanation?" Crowther's voice was troubled, but it held the old kindliness, the old human sympathy.

Piers shook his head, and stared upwards at the ceiling. "Really there was nothing to explain," he said. "She knows me—so awfully well."

"I wonder," said Crowther.

The dark eyes flashed him a derisive glance. "Better than you do, dear old man, though, I admit, I've let you into a few of my most gruesome corners. I couldn't have done it if I hadn't trusted you. You realize that?"

Crowther looked him straight in the face. "That being so, my son," he said, "you needn't be so damned light-hearted for my benefit."

A gleam of haughty surprise drove the smile out of Piers' eyes. He straightened himself sharply. "On my soul, Crowther——" he began, then stopped and leaned back again in his chair. "Oh, all right. I forgot. You say any silly rot you like to me."

"And now and then the truth also," said Crowther.

Piers' eyes fenced with his, albeit a faint smile hovered about the corners of his mouth. "I really am not such a humbug as you are pleased to imagine," he said after a moment, with a boyish touch of pride. "I'm feeling light-hearted, and that's a fact."

"Then you are about the only man in England to-day who is," responded Crowther.

"That may be," carelessly Piers made answer. "Nearly everyone is more or less scared. I'm not. It's going to be a mighty struggle—a Titanic struggle—but we shall come out on top."

"At a frightful cost," Crowther said.

Piers leaped to his feet. "We shan't shirk it on that account. See here, Crowther! I'll tell you something—if you'll swear to keep it dark!"

Crowther looked up at the eager, glowing face and a very tender look came into his own. "Well, Piers?" he said.

Piers caught him suddenly by the shoulders. "Crowther, Crowther, old chap, congratulate me! I took—the King's shilling—to-day!"

"Ah!" Crowther said.

He gripped Piers' arms tightly, feeling the vitality of his pulse in every sinew, every tense nerve. And before his mental sight there rose the dread vision of war—the insatiable—striding like a devouring monster over a whole continent. With awful clearness he saw the fields of slain. . . .

His eyes came back to Piers, splendid in the fire of his youth, flushed already with the grim joy of the coming conflict. He got up slowly, still looking into the handsome, olive face with its patrician features and arrogant self-confidence. And a cold hand seemed to close upon his heart.

"Oh, boy!" he said.

Piers frowned upon him, still half laughing. "What? Are we down-hearted? Buck up, man! Congratulate me! I was one of the first."

But congratulation stuck in Crowther's throat. "I wish this had come—twenty years ago!" was all he found to say.

"Thank heaven it didn't!" ejaculated Piers. "Why, don't you see it's the one thing for me—about the only stroke of real luck I've ever had in my life?"

"And your wife doesn't know?" said Crowther.

"She does not. And I won't have her told. Mind that!" Piers' voice was suddenly determined. "She knows I shan't keep out of it, and that's enough. If she wants me—which she won't—she can get at me through Victor or one of them. But that won't happen. Don't you worry yourself as to that, my good Crowther! I know jolly well what I'm doing. Don't you see it's the chance of my life? Do you think I'm going to miss it—what?"

"I think you're going to break her heart," Crowther said gravely.

"That's because you don't understand," Piers made steady reply. "Nothing will alter so long as I stay. But this war is going to alter everything. We shall none of us come out of it as we went in. When I come back—things will be different."

He spoke sombrely. The boyish ardour had gone out of him. Something of fatefulness, something of solemn realization, of steadfast fortitude, had taken its place.

"I tell you, Crowther," he said, "I am not doing this thing without weighing the cost. But—I haven't much to lose, and I've all to gain. Even if it doesn't do—what I hope, it'll steady me down, it'll make a man of me—and not—a murderer."

His voice sank on the last word. He freed himself from Crowther's hold and turned away.

Once more he opened the window to the roar of London's life, and so standing, with his back to Crowther, he spoke again jerkily, with obvious effort. "Do you remember telling me that something would turn up? Well—it has. I'm waiting to see what will come of it. But—if it's any satisfaction to you to know it—I've got clear of my own particular hell at last. I haven't got very far, mind, and it's a beastly desert road I'm on. But I know it'll lead somewhere; so I shall stick to it now."

He paused a moment, then flung round and faced Crowther with a certain air of triumph.

"Meantime, old chap, don't you worry yourself about either of us! My wife will go to her friend Mrs. Lorimer till I come home again. Then—possibly—with any luck—she'll come to me."

He smiled with the words and came back to the table. "May I have a drink?" he said.

Crowther poured one out for him in silence. Somehow he could not speak. There was that about Piers that stirred him too deeply for speech just then. He lifted his own glass with no more than a gesture of goodwill.

"I say, don't be so awfully jolly about it!" laughed Piers. "I tell you it's going to end all right. Life is like that."

His voice was light, but it held an appeal to which Crowther could not fail to respond.

"God bless you, my son!" he said. "Life is such a

mighty big thing that even what we call failure doesn't count in the long run. You'll win through somehow."

"And p'raps a little over—what?" laughed Piers. "Who knows?"

"Who knows?" Crowther echoed, with a smile.

But he could not shake free from the chill foreboding that had descended upon him, and when Piers had gone he stood for a long time before his open window, wrestling with the dark phantom, trying to reason away a dread which he knew to be beyond all reasoning.

And all through the night that followed, those words of Piers' pursued him, marring his rest: "It's a beastly desert road I'm on, but I know it'll lead somewhere." And the high courage of his bearing! The royal confidence of his smile!

Ah, God! Those boys of the Empire, going forth so gallantly to the sacrifice!

CHAPTER VI

THE ENCOUNTER

PIERS was right. When Avery left Stanbury Cliffs, she went back to her old life at Rodding Vicarage.

Local gossip regarding her estrangement from her husband had practically exhausted itself some time before, and in any case it would have been swamped by the fevered anxiety that possessed the whole country during those momentous days.

She slipped back into her old niche almost as if she had never left it. Mrs. Lorimer was ill with grief and overwork. It seemed only natural that Avery should take up the burden of her care. Even the Vicar could say nothing against it.

Avery sometimes wondered if Jeanie's death had pierced the armour of his self-complacence at any point. If it had, it was not perceptible; but she did fancy now and then that she detected in him a shade more of consideration for his wife than he had been wont to display. He condescended to bestow upon her a little more of his kindly patronage, and he was certainly less severe in his dealings with the children.

Of the blank in Mrs. Lorimer's life only Avery had any

conception, for she shared it with her during every hour of the day. Perhaps her own burden weighed more heavily upon her than ever before at that time, for the anxiety she suffered was sometimes more than she could bear. For Piers had gone from her without a word. Straight from Jeanie's deathbed he had gone, without a single word of explanation or farewell. That she had wounded him deeply, albeit inadvertently, on that last day she knew; but with his arm closely clasping her by Jeanie's bedside she had dared to hope that he had forgiven the wound. Now she felt that it was otherwise. He had gone from her in bitterness of soul, and the barrier between them was such that she could not call him back. More and more the conviction grew upon her that those moments of tenderness had been no more than a part of the game he had summoned her to play for Jeanie's sake. He had called it a hollow bargain. He had declared that for no other reason would he have proposed it to her. And now that the farce was over, he had withdrawn from it. He had said that he had not found it easy. He had called it mere pretence. And now she had begun to think that he meant their separation to be final. If he had uttered one word of farewell, if he had but sent her a line later, she knew that she would have responded in some measure, even though the gulf between them remained unbridged. But his utter silence was unassailable. The conviction grew upon her that he no longer desired to bridge the gulf. He meant to accept their estrangement as inevitable. He had left her, and he did not wish to return.

Through the long, weary watches of many nights Avery pondered his attitude, and sought in vain for any other explanation. She came at last to believe that the fierce flame of his passion had wholly burned itself out, consuming all the love he had ever known, and that only ashes remained.

So she could not call him back, and for a time she even shrank from asking news of him. Then one day she met Victor sorrowfully exercising Cæsar along the confines of the park, and stopped him when with a melancholy salute he would have passed her by.

His eyes brightened a little at her action, but he volunteered no information, and she decided later that he had obeyed orders in adopting this attitude. With an effort she questioned him. How was it he was not with his master?

He spread out his hands in mournful protest. *Mais Monsieur Pierre* had not required his services *depuis longtemps*. He was become very independent. But yes, he was engaged upon war work. In the Army? But yes again. Did not *Madame* know? And then he became vague and sentimental, bemoaning his own age and consequent inactivity, and finally went away with brimming eyes and the dubiously-expressed hope that *le bon Dieu* would fight on the right side.

It was all wholly unsatisfactory, and Avery yearned to know more. But the pain of investigating further held her back. If that growing conviction of hers were indeed the truth, she shrank morbidly from seeming to make any advance. No one seemed to know definitely what had become of Piers. She could not bring herself to apply to outsiders for information, and there was no one to take up her case and make inquiries on her behalf. Lennox Tudor had volunteered for service in the Medical Corps and had been accepted. She did not so much as know where he was, though he was declared by Miss Whalley, who knew most things, to be on Salisbury Plain. She sometimes wondered with wry humour if Miss Whalley could have enlightened her as to her husband's whereabouts; but that lady's attitude towards her was invariably expressive of such icy disapproval that she never ventured to put the wonder into words.

And then one afternoon of brilliant autumn she was shopping with Gracie in Wardenhurst, and came face to face with Ina Guyes.

Dick Guyes had gone into the Artillery, and Ina had returned to her father's house. She and Avery had not met since Ina's wedding-day more than a year before; but their recognition was mutual and instant.

There was a moment of hesitation on both sides, a difficult moment of intangible reluctance; then Avery held out her hand.

"How do you do?" she said.

Ina took the hand perfunctorily between her fingers and at once relinquished it. She was looking remarkably handsome, Avery thought; but her smile was not conspicuously amiable, and her eyes held something that was very nearly akin to condemnation.

"Quite well, thanks," she said, with her off-hand air of

arrogance, which had become much more marked since her marriage. "You all right?"

Avery felt herself grow reticent and chilly as she made reply. The girl's eyes of scornful inquiry made her stiffen instinctively. She was prepared to bow and pass on, but for some reason Ina was minded to linger.

"Has Piers come down yet?" she asked abruptly. "I saw him in town two nights ago. I've been up there for a day or two with Dick, but he has rejoined now. It's been embarkation leave. They're off directly."

Off! Avery's heart gave a single hard throb and stood still. She looked at Ina wordlessly. The shop in which they stood suddenly lost all form and sound. It seemed to float round her in nebulous billows.

"Good gracious!" said Ina. "Don't look like that! What's up? Aren't you well? Here, sit down! Or better still, come outside!"

She gripped Avery's arm in a tense, insistent grasp and piloted her to the door.

Avery went, hardly knowing what she did. Ina turned commandingly to Gracie.

"Look here, child! You stay and collect the parcels! I'm going to take Lady Evesham a little way in the car. We'll come back for you in a few minutes."

She had her own way, as she had always had it on every occasion, save one, throughout her life.

When Avery felt her heart begin to beat again, she was lying back in a closed car with Ina seated beside her, very upright, extremely alert.

"Don't speak!" the latter said, as their eyes met. "I'll tell you all I know. Dick and I have been stopping at Marchmont's for the last five days, and one night Piers walked in. Of course we made him join us. He was very thin, but looked quite tough and sunburnt. He is rather magnificent in khaki—like a prince masquerading. I think he talked without ceasing during the whole evening, but he didn't say a single word that I can remember. He expects to go almost any day now. He is in a regiment of Lancers, but I couldn't get any particulars out of him. He didn't choose to be communicative, so of course I left him alone. He is turning white about the temples; did you know?"

Avery braced herself to answer the blunt question. There

was something merciless about Ina's straight regard. It pierced her; but oddly she felt no resentment, only a curious sensation of compassionate sympathy.

"Yes, I saw him—some weeks ago," she said.

"You have not decided to separate, then? Everyone said you had."

Ina's tone was brutally direct, yet still, strangely, Avery felt no indignation.

"We have not been—friends—for the last year," she said.

"Ah! I thought not. And why? Just because of that story about your first husband's death that Dick's hateful cousin spread about on our wedding-day?"

Ina looked at her with searching, challenging eyes, and Avery felt suddenly as if she were the younger and weaker of the two.

"Was it because of that?" Ina insisted.

"Yes," she admitted.

"And you let such a thing as that come between you and —and—Piers!" There was incredulous amazement in Ina's voice. "You actually had the—the—the presumption!" Coherent words suddenly seemed to fail her, but she went on regardless, not caring how they came. "A man like Piers—a—a—Triton like that—such a being as is only turned out once in—in a dozen centuries! Oh, fool! Fool!" She clenched her hands, and beat them impotently upon her lap. "What did it matter what he'd done? He was yours. He worshipped you. And the worship of a man like Piers must be—must be——" She broke off, one hand caught convulsively to her throat; then swallowed hard and rushed on. "You sent him away, did you? You wouldn't live with him any longer? My God! Piers!" Again her throat worked spasmodically, and she controlled it with fierce effort. "He won't stay true to you of course," she said more quietly. "You don't expect that, do you? You can't care—since you wouldn't stick to him. You've practically forced him into the mire. I sometimes think that one virtuous woman can do more harm in the world than a dozen of the other sort. You've embittered him for life. You've made him suffer horribly. I expect you've suffered too. I hope you have! But your sorrows are not to be compared with his. He has red blood in his veins, but

you're too attenuated with goodness to know what real suffering means. You had the whole world in your grasp and you threw it away for a whim, just because you were too small, too contemptibly mean, to understand. You thought you loved him, I daresay. Well, you didn't. Love is a very different thing. Love never casts away. But of course you can't understand that. You are one of those women who keep down all the blinds lest the sunshine should fade their souls. You don't know even the beginnings of Love!"

Passionately she uttered the words, but in a voice pitched so low that Avery only just caught them. And having uttered them, almost in the same breath, she took up the speaking-tube and addressed the chauffeur.

Avery sat quite still and silent. She felt as if she had been attacked and completely routed by a creature considerably smaller, but infinitely more virile, more valiant, than herself.

Ina did not speak to her again for several minutes. She threw herself back against the cushions with an oddly petulant gesture, and leaned there staring moodily out.

Then, as they neared their starting-point, she sat up and spoke again with a species of bored indifference: "Of course it's no affair of mine. I don't care two straws how you treat him. But surely you'll try and give him some sort of send-off? I wouldn't let even Dick go without that."

Even Dick! There was a world of revelation in those words. Avery's heart stirred again in pity, and still her indignation slumbered.

They reached the shop before which Gracie was waiting for them, and stopped.

"Good-bye!" Avery said gently.

"Oh, good-bye!" Ina looked at her with eyes half closed. "I won't get out if you don't mind. I must be getting back."

She did not offer her hand, but she did not refuse it when very quietly Avery offered her own. It was not a warm hand-clasp on either side, but neither was it unfriendly.

As she drove away, Ina leaned forward and bowed with an artificial smile on her lips. And Avery saw that she was very pale.

CHAPTER VII

THE PLACE OF REPENTANCE

LIKE a prince masquerading! How vivid was the picture those words called up to Avery's mind! The regal pose of the body, the turn of the head, the faultless beauty of the features, and over all, that nameless pride of race, arrogant yet wholly unconscious—the stamp of the old Roman patrician, revived from the dust of ages!

Aloof, yet never out of her ken, that picture hung before her all through the night, the centre-piece of every vision that floated through her weary brain. In the morning she awoke to a definite resolve.

He had left her before she could stay him; but she would go to him now. Whether or not he wanted her—yes, even with the possibility of seeing him turn from her—she would seek him out. Yet this once more she would offer to him that love and faith which he had so cruelly sullied. If he treated her with cold contempt, she would yet offer to him all that she had—all that she had. Not because she had forgiven him or in any sense forgotten; but because she must; because neither forgiveness nor forgetfulness came into the matter, but only those white hairs above his temples that urged her, that drove her, that compelled her.

There were no white hairs in her own brown tresses. Could it be that he had really suffered more than she? If so, God pity him! God help him!

For the first time since their parting, the prayer for him that rose from her heart kindled within her a glow that burned as fire from the altar. She had prayed. She had prayed. But her prayers had seemed to come back to her from a void immeasurable that held naught but the echoes of her cry.

But now—was it because she was ready to act as well as to pray?—it seemed to her that her appeal had reached the Infinite. And it was then that she began to learn that prayer is not only a passive asking, but the eager straining of every nerve towards fulfilment.

It seemed useless to go to the Abbey for news. She would master her reluctance and go to Crowther. She was sure

that he would be in a position to tell her all there was to know.

Mrs. Lorimer warmly applauded the idea. The continued estrangement of the two people whom she loved so dearly was one of her greatest secret sorrows now. She urged Avery to go, shedding tears over the thought of Piers going unspeeded into the awful dangers of war.

So by the middle of the morning Avery was on her way. It seemed to her the longest journey she had ever travelled. She chafed at every pause. And through it all, Ina's fierce words ran in a perpetual refrain through her brain: "Love never casts away—Love never casts away."

She felt as if the girl had ruthlessly let a flood of light in upon her gloom, dazzling her, bewildering her, hurting her with its brilliance. She had forced aside those drawn blinds. She had pierced to the innermost corners. And Avery herself was shocked by that which had been revealed. It had never before been given to her to see her own motives, her own soul, thus. She had not dreamed of the canker of selfishness that lay at the root of all. With shame she remembered her assurance to her husband that her love should never fail him. What of that love now—Love the Invincible—that should have shattered the gates of the prison-house and led him forth in triumph?

Reaching town, she drove straight to Crowther's rooms. But she was met with disappointment. Crowther was out. He would be back in the evening, she was told, but probably not before.

Wearily she went down again and out into the seething life of the streets to spend the longest day of her life waiting for his return. Looking back upon that day afterwards, she often wondered how she actually spent the time. To and fro, to and fro, this way and that; now trying to ease her soul by watching the soldiers at drill in the Park, the long, long khaki lines and sunburned faces; now pacing the edge of the water and seeking distraction in the antics of some water-fowl; now back again in the streets, moving with the crowd, seeing soldiers, soldiers on every hand, scanning each almost mechanically with the vagrant hope of meeting one who moved with a haughty pride of carriage and looked like a prince in disguise. Sometimes she stood to see a whole troop pass by, splendid boys swinging along

with laughter and careless singing. She listened to the tramping feet and merry voices with a heart that sank ever lower and lower. She had started the day with a quivering wonder if the end of it might find her in his arms. But ever as the hours passed by the certainty grew upon her that this would not be. She grew sick with the longing to see his face. She ached for the sound of his voice. And deep in the heart of her she knew that this futile yearning was to be her portion for many, many days. For over a year he had waited, and he had waited in vain. Now it was her turn.

It was growing dusk when she went again in search of Crowther. He had not returned, but she could not endure that aimless wandering any longer. She went in to wait for him, there in the room where Piers had found sanctuary during some of the darkest hours of his life.

She was too utterly wearied to move about, but sat sunk in the chair by the window, almost too numbed with misery and fatigue for coherent thought. The dusk deepened about her. The roar of London's life came vaguely from afar. Through it and above it she still seemed to hear the tread of the marching feet as the gallant lines swung by. And still with aching concentration she seemed to be searching for that one beloved face.

What did it matter what he had done? He was hers. He was hers. And, O God, how she wanted him! How gladly in that hour would she have yielded him all—all that she had to offer!

There came a quiet step without, a steady hand on the door. She started up with a wild hope clamouring at her heart. Might he not be there also? It was possible! Surely it was possible!

She took a quick step forward. No conventional word would rise to her lips. They only stiffly uttered the one name: "Piers!"

And Crowther answered her, just as though no interval of more than a year lay between them and the old warm friendship. "He left for the Front to-day."

With the words he reached her, and she remembered later the sustaining strength with which his hands upheld her when she reeled beneath the blow.

He put her down again in the chair, and knelt beside her,

for she clung to him convulsively, scarcely knowing what she did.

"He ought to have let you know," he said. "But he wouldn't be persuaded. I believe—right up to the last—he hoped he would hear something of you. But you know him, his damnable pride—or was it chivalry this time? On my soul, I scarcely know which. He behaved almost as if he were under an oath not to make the first advance. I am very sorry, Avery. But my hands were tied."

He paused, and she knew that he was waiting for a word from her—of kindness or reproach—some intimation of her feelings towards himself. But she could only utter voicelessly, "I shall never see him again."

He pressed her icy hands close in his own, but he said no word of hope. He seemed to know instinctively that it was not the moment.

"You can write to him," he said. "You can write now—to-night. The letter will reach him in a few days at most. He calls himself Beverley—Private Beverley. Let me give you some tea, and you can sit down and write straight away."

Kindly and practical, he offered her the consolation of immediate action; and the crushing sense of loss began gradually to lose its hold upon her.

"I am going to tell you everything—all I know," he said. "I told him I should do so if you came to me. I only wish you had come a little sooner; but that is beside the point."

Again he paused. Her eyes were upon him, but she said nothing.

Finding her hold had slackened, he got up, lighted a lamp, and sat down with its light streaming across his rugged face.

"I don't know what you have been thinking of me all this time," he said, "if you have stooped to think of me at all."

"I have often thought of you," Avery answered. "But I had a feeling that you—that you"—she hesitated—"that you could scarcely be in sympathy with us both," she ended.

"I see." Crowther's eyes met hers with absolute directness. "But you realize that that was a mistake," he said.

She answered him in the affirmative. Before those straight eyes of his she could not do otherwise.

"I could not express my sympathy with you," he said. "I did not even know that it would be welcome, and I could not interfere without your husband's consent. I was bound

by a promise. But"—he smiled faintly—"I told him clearly that if you came to me I should not keep that promise. I should regard it as my release."

"What have you to tell me?" Avery asked.

"Just this," he said. "It isn't a very long story, but I don't think you have heard it before. It's just the story of one of the worst bits of bad luck that ever befell a man. He was only a lad of nineteen, and he went out into the world with all his life before him. He was rich and successful in every way, full of promise, brilliant. There was something so splendid about him that he seemed somehow to belong to a higher planet. He had never known failure or disgrace. But one night an evil fate befell him. He was forced to fight—against his will; and—he killed his man. It was an absolutely unforeseen result. He took heavy odds, and naturally he matched them with all the skill at his command. But it was a fair fight. I testify to that. He took no mean advantage."

Crowther's eyes were gazing beyond Avery. He spoke with a curious deliberation as if he were describing a vision that hung before him.

"He himself was more shocked by the man's death than anyone I have ever seen. He accepted the responsibility at once. There is a lot of nobility at the back of that man's soul. He wanted to give himself up. But I stepped in. I took the law into my own hands. I couldn't stand by and see him ruined. I made him bolt. He went, and I saw no more of him for six years. That ends the first chapter of the story."

He paused, as if for question or comment; but Avery sat in unbroken silence. Her eyes also were fixed as it were upon something very far away.

After a moment he resumed: "Six years after, I stopped at Monte Carlo on my way home, and I chanced upon him there. He was with his old grandfather, living a life that would have driven most young men crazy with boredom. But—I told you there was something fine about him—he treated the whole thing as a joke, and I saw that he was the apple of the old man's eye. He hailed me as an old friend. He welcomed me back into his life as if I were only associated with pleasant things. But I soon saw that he was not happy. The memory of that tragedy was hanging on him

like a millstone. He was trying to drag himself free. But he was like a dog on a chain. He could see his liberty, but he could not reach it. And the fact that he loved a woman, and believed that he had won her love, made the burden even heavier. So I gathered, though he had his intervals of reckless happiness when nothing seemed to matter. I didn't know who the woman was at first, but I urged him strongly to tell her the truth before he married her. And then somehow, while we were talking together one night, it came out —that trick of Fate; and in his horror and despair the boy very nearly went under altogether. It was just the fineness of his nature that kept him up."

"And your help," said Avery quietly.

His eyes comprehended her for a moment. "Yes, I did my best," he said. "But it was his own nobility in the main that gave him strength. Have you never noticed that about him? He has the greatness that only comes to most men after years of struggle."

"I have noticed," Avery said, her voice very low.

Crowther went on in his slow, steady way: "Well, after that I left. And the next thing I knew was that the old man had died, and he was married to you. You didn't let me into the secret very soon, you know." He smiled a little. "Of course I realized that you had gone to him rather suddenly to comfort his loneliness. It was just the sort of thing I should have expected of you. And I thought—too —that he had told you all, and you had loved him well enough to forgive him. It wasn't till I came to see you that I realized that this was not so, and I had been in the house some hours even then before it dawned on me."

Again he spoke as one describing something seen afar.

"Of course I was sorry," he said. "I knew that sooner or later you were bound to come up against it. I couldn't help. I just waited. And as it chanced, I didn't have to wait very long. Piers came to me one night in August, and told me that the whole thing had come out, and that you had refused to live with him any longer. I understood your feelings. It was inevitable that at first you should feel like that. But I knew you loved him. I knew that sooner or later that would make a difference. And I tried to hearten him up. For he—poor lad!—was nearly mad with trouble."

Avery's hands closed tightly upon each other in her lap. She sat in strained silence, still gazing straight before her.

Gently Crowther finished his tale. "That's about all there is to tell, except that from the day he left you to this, he has borne his burden like a man, and he has never once done anything unworthy of you. He is a man, Avery, not a boy any longer. He is a man you can trust, for he will never deceive you again. If he hasn't yet found his place of repentance, it hasn't been for lack of the seeking. If you can send him a line of forgiveness, he will go into this war with a high heart, and you will have reason to be proud of him when you meet again."

He got up and moved in his slow, massive way across the room.

"Now you will let me give you some tea," he said. "I am sure you must be tired."

Had he seen the tears rolling down her face as she sat there? If so, he gave no sign. Quietly he busied himself with his preparations, and before he came back to her she had wiped them away.

He waited upon her with womanly gentleness, and later he went with her to the hotel at which Piers usually stayed, and saw her established there for the night.

It was not till the moment of parting that she found any words in which to express herself.

Then, with her hand in his, she whispered chokingly: "I feel as if—as if—I had failed him—just when he needed me most. He was in prison, and—I left him there."

Crowther's steady eyes looked into hers with a kindness that was full of sustaining comfort. "He has broken out of his prison," he said. "Don't fret—don't fret!"

Her lips were quivering painfully. She turned her face aside. "He will scarcely need me now," she said.

"Write and ask him!" said Crowther gently.

She made a piteous gesture of hopelessness. "I have got to find my own place of repentance first," she said.

"I shouldn't wait," said Crowther. "Write to-night!"

And so for half the night Avery sat writing a letter to her husband which he was destined never to receive.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RELEASE OF THE PRISONER

HOW long was it since the fight round the *château?* Piers had no idea. The damp chill of the autumn night was upon him and he was cold to the bone.

It had been a desperate fight, in which quarter had been neither asked nor given, hand to hand and face to face, with wild oaths and dreadful laughter. He had not noticed the tumult at the time, but the echoes of it still rang in his ears. A desperate fight against overwhelming odds! For the *château* had been strongly held, and the struggle for it had seemed Titanic, albeit only a detail of a rearguard action. There had been guns there that had harried them all the previous day. It had become a matter of necessity to silence those guns. So the effort had been made, a glorious effort crowned with success. They had mastered the garrison; they had silenced the guns; and then, within an hour of their victory, disaster had come upon them. Great numbers of the enemy had swept suddenly upon them, had surrounded them and swallowed them up.

It was all over now. The tide of battle had swept on. The place was silent as the grave. He was the only man left, flung as it were upon a dust-heap in a corner of the world that had ceased to matter to anyone.

He had lain for hours unconscious till those awful chills had awakened him. Doubtless he had been left for dead among his dead comrades. He wondered why he was not dead. He had a distinct recollection of being shot through the heart. And the bullet had gone out at his back. He vividly remembered that also—the red-hot anguish as it had torn its way through him, the awful emptiness of death that had followed.

How had he escaped—if he had escaped? How had he returned from that great silence? Why had the dread Door shut against him only, imprisoning him here when all the rest had passed through? There seemed to be some mystery

about it. He tried to follow it out. Death was no difficult matter. He was convinced of that. Yet somehow Death had eluded him. He was as a man who had lost his way in a fog. Doubtless he would find it again. He did not want to wander alone in this valley of dry bones. He wanted to get free. He was sure that sooner or later that searing, red-hot bullet would do its work.

For a space he drifted back into the vast sea of unconsciousness in which he had been submerged for so long. Even that was bound to lead somewhere. Surely there was no need to worry!

But very soon it ceased to be a calm sea. It grew troubled. It began to toss. He felt himself flung from billow to billow. and the sound of a great storm rose in his ears.

He opened his eyes suddenly wide to a darkness that could be felt, and it was as though a flame of agony went through him, a raging thirst that burned him fiendishly.

Ah! He knew the meaning of that! It was horribly familiar to him. He was back in hell—back in the torture-chamber where he had so often agonized, closed in behind those bars of iron which he had fought so often and so fruitlessly to force asunder.

He stretched out his hands and one of them came into contact with the icy cold of a dead man's face. It was the man who had shot him, and who in his turn had been shot. He shuddered at the touch, shrank into himself. And again the fiery anguish caught him, set him writhing, shrivelled him as parchment is shrivelled in the flame. He went through it, racked with torment, conscious of naught else in all the world, so pierced and possessed by pain that it seemed as if all the suffering that those dead men had missed were concentrated within him. He felt as if it must shatter him, soul and body, dissolve him with its sheer intensity. And yet somehow his straining flesh endured. He came through his inferno, sweating, gasping, with broken prayers and the wrung, bitter crying of smitten strength!

Again the black sea took him, bearing him to and fro, deadening his pain but giving him no rest. He tossed on the troubled waters for interminable ages. He watched a full moon rise blood red and awful and turn gradually to a whiteness of still more appalling purity. For a long, long time he watched it, trying to recall something which eluded

him, chasing a will-o'-the-wisp memory round and round the fevered labyrinths of his brain.

Then at last very suddenly it turned and confronted him. There in the old-world garden that was every moment growing more distinct and definite, he looked once more upon his wife's face in the moonlight, saw her eyes of shrinking horror raised to his, heard her low-spoken words: "I shall never forgive you."

The vision passed, blotted out by returning pain. He buried his head beneath his arms and groaned. . . .

Again—hours after, it seemed—the great cloud of his agony lifted. He came to himself, feeling deadly sick, but no longer gripped by that fiendish torture. He raised himself on his elbows and faced the blinding moonlight. It seemed to pierce him, but he forced himself to meet it. He looked forth over the silent garden.

Strange silhouettes of shrubs weirdly fashioned filled the place. At a little distance he caught the gleam of white marble, and there came to him the tinkle of a fountain. He became aware again of raging thirst—thirst that tore at the very root of his being. He gathered himself together for the greatest effort of his life. The sound of the water mocked him, maddened him. He would drink—he would drink—before he died!

The man at his side lay with face upturned starkly to the moonlight. It gleamed upon eyes that were glazed and sightless. The ground all around them was dark with blood.

Slowly Piers raised himself, feeling his heart pump with the effort, feeling the stiffened wound above it tear and gape asunder. He tried to hold his breath while he moved, but he could not. It came in sharp, painful gasps, sawing its way through his tortured flesh. But in spite of it he managed to lift himself to his hands and knees; and then for a long, long time he dared attempt no more. For he could feel the blood flowing steadily from his wound, and a deadly faintness was upon him against which he needed all his strength to fight.

He thought it must have overwhelmed him for a time at least; yet when it began to lessen he had not sunk down again. He was still propped upon hands and knees—the only living creature in that place of dead men.

He could see them whichever way he looked over the

trampled sward—figures huddled or outstretched in the moonlight, all motionless, ashen-faced.

He saw none wounded like himself. Perhaps the wounded had been already collected, perhaps they had crawled to shelter. Or perhaps he was the only one against whom the Door had been closed. He had been left for dead. He had nothing to live for. Yet it seemed that he could not die.

He looked at the man at his side lying wrapt in the aloofness of Death. Poor devil! How horrible he looked, and how indifferent! A sense of shuddering disgust came upon Piers. He wondered if he would die as hideously.

Again the fountain mocked him softly from afar. Again the fiery torment of his thirst awoke. He contemplated attempting to walk, but instinct warned him against the risk of a headlong fall. He began with infinite difficulty to crawl upon hands and knees.

His progress was desperately slow, the suffering it entailed was sometimes unendurable. And always he knew that the blood was draining from him with every foot of ground he covered. But ever that maddening fountain lured him on. . . .

The night had stretched into untold ages. He wondered if in his frequent spells of unconsciousness he had somehow missed many days. He had seen the moon swing half across the sky. He had watched with delirious amusement the dead men rise to bury each other. And he had spent hours in wondering what would happen to the last of them. His head felt oddly light, as if it were full of air, a bubble of prismatic colours that might burst into nothingness at any moment. But his body felt as if it were fettered with a thousand chains. He could hear them clanking as he moved.

But still that fountain with its marble basin seemed the end and aim of his existence. Often he forgot to be thirsty now, but he never forgot that he must reach the fountain before he died.

Sometimes his thirst would come back in burning spasms to urge him on, and he always knew that there was a great reason for perseverance, always felt that if he slackened he would pay a terrible penalty.

The fountain was very far away. He crawled along with ever-increasing difficulty, marking the progress of his own shadow in the strong moonlight. There was something

pitiless about the moon. It revealed so much that might have been mercifully veiled.

From the far distance there came the long roll of cannon, shattering the peace of the night, but it was a long way off. In the *château* garden there was no sound but the tinkle of the fountain and the laboured, spasmodic breathing of a man wounded well-nigh unto death.

Only a few yards separated him now from the running water. It sounded like fairy laughter, and all the gruesome horrors of the place faded into unreality. Surely it was fed by the stream at home that flowed through the preserves—the stream where the primroses grew!

Only a few more yards! But how damnably difficult it was to cover them! He could hardly drag his weighted limbs along. It was the old game. He knew it well. But how devilish to fetter him so! It had been the ruin of his life. He set his teeth, and forced himself on. He would win through in spite of all.

The moonlight poured dazzlingly upon the white marble basin, and on the figure of a nymph who bent above it, delicately poised like a butterfly about to take wing. He wondered if she would flee at his approach, but she did not. She stood there waiting for him, a thing of infinite daintiness, the one object untouched in that ravaged garden. Perhaps after all it was she and not the fountain that drew him so irresistibly. He had a great longing to hear her speak, but he was afraid to address her lest he should scare her away. She was so slight, so spiritual, so exquisite in her fairy grace. She made him think of Jeanie—little Jeanie who had prayed for his happiness and had not lived to see her prayer fulfilled.

He drew near with a certain stealthiness, fearing to startle her. He would have risen to his feet, but his strength was ebbing fast. He knew he could not.

And then—just ere he reached the marble basin, the goal of that long, bitter journey—he saw her turn a little towards him; he heard her speak:

"Dear Sir Galahad!"

"Jeanie!" he gasped.

She seemed to sway above the gleaming water. Even then—even then—he was not sure of her—till he saw her face of childish purity and the happy smile of greeting in her eyes!

"How very tired you must be!" she said.

"I am, Jeanie. I am!" he groaned in answer. "These chains—these iron bars—I shall never get free!"

He saw her white arms reach out to him. He thought her fingers touched his brow. And he knew quite suddenly that the journey was over, and he could lie down and rest.

Her voice came to him very softly, with a hushing tenderness through the miniature rush and gurgle of the water. As usual she sought to comfort him, but he heard a thrill of triumph as well as sympathy in her words.

"He hath broken the gates of brass," she said. "And smitten the bars of iron in sunder."

His fingers closed upon the edge of the pool. He felt the water splash his face as he sank down; and though he was too spent to drink he thanked God for bringing him thither.

Later it seemed to him that a Divine Presence came through the garden, that Someone stooped and touched him, and lo, his chains were broken and his burden gone! And he roused himself to ask for pardon; which was granted to him ere that Presence passed away.

* * * * * * * *

He never knew exactly what happened after that night in the garden of the ruined *château*. There were a great many happenings, but none of them seemed to concern him very vitally.

He wandered through great spaces of oblivion, intersected with terrible streaks of excruciating pain. During the intervals of this fearful suffering he was acutely conscious, but he invariably forgot everything again when the merciful unconsciousness came back. He knew in a vague way that he lay in a hospital-tent with other dying men, knew when they moved him at last because he could not die, suffered agonies unutterable upon an endless road that never seemed to lead to anywhere, and finally awoke to find that the journey had been over for several days.

He tried very hard not to wake. Waking invariably meant anguish. He longed unspeakably for Death, but Death was denied him. And when someone came and stooped over him and took his nerveless hand, he whispered with closed eyes an earnest request not to be called back.

"It's such—a ghastly business"—he muttered piteously—"this waking."

"Won't you speak to a friend, Piers?" a voice said.

He opened his eyes then. He had not heard his own name for months. He looked up into eyes that gleamed hawk-like through glasses, and a throb of recognition went through his heart.

"You!" he whispered, striving desperately to master the sickening pain that that throb had started.

"All right. Don't speak for a bit!" said Tudor quietly. "I think I can help you."

He did help, working over him steadily, with the utmost gentleness, till the worst of the paroxysm was past.

Piers was pathetically grateful. His high spirit had sunk very low in those days. No one that he could remember had ever done anything to ease his pain before.

"It's been—so infernal," he whispered presently. "You know—I was shot—through the heart."

Tudor's face was very grave. "Yes, you're pretty bad," he said. "But you've pulled through so far. It's in your favour, that. And look here, you must lie flat on your back always. Do you understand? It's about your only chance."

"Of living?" whispered Piers. "But I don't want to live. I want to die."

"Don't be a fool!" said Tudor.

"I'm not a fool. I hate life!" A tremor of passion ran through the words.

Tudor laid a hand upon him. "Piers, if ever any man had anything to live for, you are that man," he said.

"What do you mean?" Piers' eyes, dark as the night through which he had come, looked up at him.

"I mean just that. If you can't live for your own sake, live for hers! She wants you. It'll break her heart if you go out now."

"Great Scot, man! You're not in earnest!" whispered Piers.

"I am in earnest. I know exactly what I am saying. I don't talk at random. She loves you. She wants you. You've lived for yourself all your life. Now—you've got to live for her."

Tudor's voice was low and vehement. A faint sparkle came into Piers' eyes as he heard it.

"By George!" he said softly. "You're rather a brick—what? But haven't you thought—what might happen—if—if I went out after all? You used to be rather great—at getting me out of the way."

"I didn't realize how all-important you were," rejoined Tudor, with a bitter smile. "You needn't go any further in that direction. It leads to a blank wall. You've got to live whether you like it or not. I'm going to do all I can to make you live, and you'll be a hound if you don't back me up."

His eyes looked down upon Piers, dominant and piercingly intent. And—perhaps it was mere physical weakness, or possibly the voluntary yielding of a strong will that was in its own way as great as the strength to which it yielded—Piers surrendered with a meekness such as Tudor had never before witnessed in him.

"All right," he said. "I'll do—my best."

And so oddly they entered into a partnership that had for its sole end and aim the happiness of the woman they loved; and in that partnership their rivalry was for ever extinguished.

CHAPTER IX

HOLY GROUND

"THEY say he will never fight again," said Crowther gravely. "He may live. They think he will live. But he will never be strong."

"If only I might see him!" Avery said.

"Yes, I know. That is the hardest part. But be patient a little longer! So much depends on it. I was told only this morning that any agitation might be fatal. No one seems to understand how it is that he has managed to live at all. He is just hanging on, poor lad—just hanging on."

"I want to help him," Avery said.

"I know you do. And so you can—if you will. But not by going to him. That would do more harm than good."

"How else can I do anything?" she said. "Surely—surely he wants to see me!"

She was standing in Crowther's room, facing him with that in her eyes that moved him to a great compassion.

He put his hand on her shoulder. "My dear, of course he wants to see you; but there will be no keeping him quiet when he does. He isn't equal to it. He is putting up the biggest fight of his life, and he wants all his strength for it. But you can do your part now if you will. You can go down to Rodding Abbey and make ready to receive him there. And you can send Victor to help me with him as soon as he is able to leave the hospital. He and I will bring him down to you. And if you will be there just in the ordinary way, I think there will be less risk of excitement. Will you do this, Avery? Is it asking too much of you?"

His grey eyes looked straight down into hers with the wide friendliness that was as the open gateway to his soul, and some of the bitter strain of the past few weeks passed from her own as she looked back.

"Nothing would be too much," she said. "I would do anything—anything. But if he should want me—and I were not at hand? If—if—he should—die!" Her voice sank.

Crowther's hand pressed upon her. "He is not going to die," he said stoutly. "He doesn't mean to die. But he will probably have to go slow for the rest of his life. That is where you will be able to help him. His only chance lies in patience. You must teach him to be patient."

Her lips quivered in a smile. "Piers!" she said. "Can you picture it?"

"Yes, I can. Because I know that only patience can have brought him to where he is at present. They say it is nothing short of a miracle, and I believe it. God often works His miracles that way. And I always knew that Piers was great."

Crowther's slow smile appeared, transforming his whole face. He held Avery's hand for a little, and let it go.

"So you will do this, will you?" he said. "I think the boy would be just about pleased to find you there. And you can depend on me to bring him down to you as soon as he is able to bear it."

"You are very good," Avery said. "Yes, I will go."

But, as Crowther knew, in going she accepted the hardest

part; and the weeks that she then spent at Rodding Abbey waiting, waiting with a sick anxiety, left upon her a mark which no time could ever erase.

When Crowther's message came to her at last, she was almost too crushed to believe. Everything was in readiness, had been in readiness for weeks. She had prepared in fevered haste, telling herself that any day might bring him. But day had followed day, and the news had always been depressing—fits of weakness, fits of pain, terrible collapses and again difficult recoveries. Not once had she been told that any ground had been gained.

And so when one day a telegram reached her earlier than usual, she hardly dared to open it, so little did she anticipate that the news could be good.

And even when the words stared her in the face: "Bringing Piers this afternoon. Crowther," she could not for awhile believe them, and sought instinctively to read into them some sinister meaning.

How she got through that day she never afterwards knew. The hours dragged leaden-footed. There was nothing to be done. She would not leave the house lest by some impossible chance he might arrive before the afternoon, but she felt that to stay within its walls was unendurable. So for the most part she paced the terrace, breathing the dank, autumnal air, picturing every phase of his journey, but never daring to picture his arrival, praying piteous, disjointed prayers that only her own soul seemed to hear.

The afternoon began to wane, and dusk came down. A small drifting rain set in with the darkness, but she was not even aware of it till David, very deferential and subdued, came to her and suggested that if she would wait in the hall Sir Piers would see her at once, as he had taken the liberty to turn on all the lights.

She knew that the old man made the suggestion out of the goodness of his heart, and she fell in with it, realizing the wisdom of going within. But when she found herself in the full glare of the great hall, alone with those shining suits of armour that mounted guard on each side of the fire-place, the awful suspense came upon her with a force that nothing could alleviate. She turned with sick loathing from the tea-tray that David had placed for her so comfortingly close to the fire. Every moment that passed

was an added torture. It was dark, it was late. The conviction was growing in her heart that when they came at last they would bring with them only her husband's dead body.

She rose and went to the open door. Where was his spirit now, she wondered? Had he leaped ahead of that empty, travelling shell? Was he already close—close—his arm entwined in hers? She covered her face with her hands. "Oh, Piers, I can't go on alone," she sobbed. "If you are dead—I must die too!"

And then, as though in obedience to a voice that had spoken within her, she raised her head again and gazed forth. The rain had drifted away. Through scudding clouds of darkness there shone, serene and splendid, a single star. Her heart gave a great throb, and was still.

"The Star of Hope!" she murmured wonderingly. "The Star of Hope!"

And in that moment inexplicably yet convincingly she knew that her prayers that had seemed so fruitless had been heard, and that an answer was very near at hand. . . .

There came the sound of a horn from the direction of the lodge. They were coming.

She turned her head and looked down the dark avenue. But she was no longer agitated or distressed by fear. She knew not what might be in store for her, but somehow, mystically, she had been endued with strength to meet it unafraid.

She heard the soft buzz of a high-powered car, and presently two lights appeared at the further end. They came towards her swiftly, almost silently. It was like the swoop of an immense bird. And then in the strong glare shed forth by the hall-lamps she saw the huge body of an ambulance-car, and a Red Cross flared symbolic in the light.

The car came to a stand immediately before her, and for a few moments nothing happened. And still she was not afraid. Still she was as it were guided and sustained and lifted above all turmoil. She seemed to stand on a mountain-top, above the seething misery that had for so long possessed her. She was braced to look upon even Death unshaken, undismayed.

Steadily she moved. She went down to the car. Old David was behind her. He came forward and opened the

door with fumbling, quivering hands. She had time to notice his agitation and to be sorry for him.

Then a voice came to her from within, and a great throb went through her of thankfulness, of relief, of joy unspeakable.

"Victor, you old ass, what are you blubbing for? Anyone would think——" A sudden pause, then in a low, eager tone, "Hullo—Avery?"

The incredulous interrogation of the words cut her to the heart. She went up the step and into the car as if drawn by an irresistible magnetism, seeing neither Crowther nor Victor, aware only of a prone, gaunt figure on a stretcher, white-haired, skeleton-featured, that reached a trembling hand to her and said again, "Hullo!"

For one wild second she felt as if she were in the presence of old Sir Beverley, so striking was the likeness that the drawn, upturned face bore to him. Then Piers' eyes, black as the night, smiled up at her, half-imperious, half-pleading, and the illusion was gone.

She stooped over him, that trembling hand fast clasped in hers; but she could not speak. No words would come.

"Been waiting—what?" he said. "I hope not for long?"

But still she could not speak. She felt choked. It was all so unnatural, so cruelly hard to bear.

"I shan't be like this always," he said. "Afraid I look an awful guy just at present."

That was all then, for Crowther came gently between them; and then he and Victor, with infinite care, lifted the stretcher and bore the master of the house into his own home.

* * * * * * *

Half an hour later Avery turned from waving a farewell to Crowther, who had insisted upon going back to town with the car that had brought them, and softly shut out the night.

She had had the library turned into a bedroom for Piers, and she crossed the hall to the door with an eagerness that carried her no further. There, gripping the handle, she was stayed.

Within, she could hear Victor moving to and fro, but she listened in vain for her husband's voice, and a great

shyness came upon her. She could not ask permission to enter.

Minutes passed while she stood there, minutes of tense listening, during which she scarcely seemed to breathe. Then very suddenly she heard a sound that set every nerve a-quiver—a groan that was more of weariness than pain, but such weariness as made her own heart throb in passionate sympathy.

Almost without knowing it, she turned the handle of the door and opened it. A moment more, and she was in the room.

He was lying flat in the bed, his dark eyes staring upwards out of deep hollows that had become cruelly distinct. There was dumb endurance in every line of him. His mouth was hard set, the chin firm as granite. And even then in his utter helplessness there was about him a greatness, a mute, unconscious majesty, that caught her by the throat.

She went softly to the bedside.

He turned his head at her coming, not quickly, not with any eagerness of welcome; but with that in his eyes, a slow kindling that seemed to surround her with the glow of a great warmth.

But when he spoke, it was upon no intimate subject. "Has Crowther gone?" he asked.

His voice was pitched very low. She saw that he spoke with deliberate quietness, as if he were training himself thereto.

"Yes," she made answer. "He wouldn't stay."

"He couldn't," said Piers. "He is going to be ordained to-morrow."

"Oh, is he?" she said in surprise. "He never told me!"

"He wouldn't," said Piers. "He never talks about himself." He moved his hand slightly towards her. "Won't you sit down?"

She glanced round. Victor was advancing behind her with a chair. Piers' eyes followed hers, and an instant later, turning back, she saw his quick frown. He raised his hand and snapped his fingers with the old imperious gesture, pointing to the door, and in a moment Victor, with a smile of peculiar gratification, put down the chair, trotted to it, opened it with a flourish, and was gone.

Avery was left standing by the bed, slightly uncertain, wanting to smile, but wanting much more to cry.

Piers' hand fell heavily. For a few seconds he lay perfectly still, with quickened breathing and drawn brows. Then his fingers patted the edge of the bed. "Sit down, sweetheart!" he said.

It was Piers the boy lover who spoke to her with those words, and hearing them, something seemed to give way within her. It was as if a tight band round her heart had suddenly been torn asunder.

She sank down on her knees beside the bed, and hid her face in his pillow. Tears—tears such as she had not shed since the beginning of their bitter estrangement—came welling up from her heart and would not be restrained. She sobbed her very soul out there beside him, subconsciously aware that in that hour his strength was greater than hers.

Like an overwhelming torrent her distress came upon her, caught her tempestuously, swept her utterly from her own control, tossed her hither and thither, flung her at last into a place of deep, deep silence, where, still kneeling with head bowed low, she became conscious, strangely, intimately conscious, of the presence of God.

It held her like a spell, that consciousness. She was as one who kneels before a vision. And even while she knelt there, lost in wonder, there came to her the throbbing gladness of faith renewed, the certainty that all would be well.

Piers' hand was on her head, stroking, caressing, soothing. By no words did he attempt to comfort her. It was strange how little either of them felt the need of words. They were together upon holy ground, and in closer communion each with each than they had ever been before. Those tears of Avery's had washed away the barrier.

Once, some time later, he whispered to her, "I never asked you to forgive me, Avery; but——"

And that was the nearest he ever came to asking her forgiveness. For she stopped the words with her lips on his, and he never thought of uttering them again.

EPILOGUE

CHRISTMAS Eve and children's voices singing in the night! Two figures by the open window listening—a man and a woman, hand in hand in the dark!

"Don't let them see us yet!" It was the woman's voice, low, but with a deep thrill in it as of full and complete content. "I knew they were coming. Gracie whispered it to me this morning. But I wasn't to tell anyone. She was so afraid their father might forbid it."

The man answered with a faint, derisive laugh that yet had in it an echo of the woman's satisfaction. He did not speak, for already through the winter darkness a single, boyish voice had taken up another verse:

"He comes, the prisoners to release
In Satan's bondage held;
The gates of brass before Him burst
The iron fetters yield."

The woman's fingers clung fast to his. "Love opens every door," she whispered.

His answering grip was close and strong. But he said nothing while the last triumphant lines were repeated:

"The gates of brass before Him burst,
The iron fetters yield."

The next verse was sung by two voices in harmony, very soft and hushed:

"He comes the broken heart to bind,
The bleeding soul to cure,
And with the treasures of His grace
To bless the humble poor."

Then came a pause, while through the quiet night there floated the sound of distant bells.

"Look!" said Piers suddenly.

And Avery, kneeling beside him, raised her eyes.

There, high above the trees, alone and splendid, there shone a great, quivering star.

His arm slid round her neck. "The Star of Hope, Avery," he whispered. "Yours—and mine."

She clung to him silently, with a closeness that was passionate.

And so the last verse, very clear and strong, came to them out of the night:

"Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
Thy welcome shall proclaim,
And Heaven's eternal arches ring
With Thy beloved Name.
And Heaven's eternal arches ring
With Thy beloved Name."

Avery leaned her head against her husband's shoulder. "I hear an angel singing," she said.

* * * * * * *

Ten minutes later, Gracie stood in the great hall with the red glow of the fire spreading all about her, her bright eyes surveying the master of the house, who lay back in a low easy-chair with his wife kneeling beside him, and Cæsar, the Dalmatian, curled up with much complacence at his feet.

"How very comfy you look!" she remarked.

And, "We are comfy," said Piers, with a smile.

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